SA COMPUTER MAGAZINE

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APRIL 2010

HP woos high fashion.

Ready to soar? Wings of Liberty Beta reviewed.

Sony capitalises on 2010 WC spectacle with new range.

Also, hands-on reviews of the Nokia N900, Epson TX700W, Canon Powershot S90, and TomTom Go750 Live, as well as a handy guide for migrating to a new handset, industry expert's opinions on the future of projectors, and all the biggest news of the month.

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April 2010

6 News

30 Columns

Features
34 Emancipating your cellphone.
Nokia E-Series.

42 Sony goes 2010 crazy!

56 Group test
Core Strengths
Intel's latest mobile Core family.

Hands on
68 Nokia N900
Nokia N900.

74 Canon S90
Canon's latest compact.

77 TomTom Start

79 TomTom GO750 Live

Nokia E-Series

Intel Core Family

Nokia N900

TomTom Start

TomTom Go750

82 Epson TX700W

84 Genius SP-i150, SP-i160

88 D-Link DIR412

92 D-Link Wireless N PCI

94 ATI Radeon 5570

Software reviews
96 Kerio Connect 7

100 Windows Tune-Up Utilities

104 Games reviews
106 Mass Effect 2
Kyle goes mad for the spacefaring action-adventure-RPG.

110 StarCraft II – Wings of Liberty
Should really have been our lead-off game, but the Beta key only came in very close to deadline.

Webware reviews
116 Evony
Browser-based games.

Epson TX700W

Genius Sp-i150

Genius Sp-i160

D-Link DIR412

Kerio Connect 7

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The digital choice

So, the first thimg you probablly want to ask is, why a digital magazine? Why not just either stay in print, or do a website?

After all its a lot of effort for the sake of a visual format which isnt perfect for the platform. Its not immediate enough, with set publication deadlines and a production phase to deal with and the lot. And nobody is going to read it like that anyway.

Well now we've come to the nub. The crux. Print publishing and Web publishing are directly, very closely related industries, but also very different. It isn't just the medium which has changed. It's the presentation, which changes the very content itself, quite fumdamentally. And these in turn affect pretty much every tier of publishing moving down the chain.

A digital magazine, therefore, is intentionally different to a Web site. Its information is the same, but in the presentation, style and most importantly consumption, it's very different. Reading a website feels quite a lot like work at times. You sit like you do at work, and your'e constantly making inputs and grabbing snippets of huge amounts of data.

With this SACM digital magazine and sister title Drive, wed like you to - and try it with me now - open it up, grab a coffee, then fullscreen it and sit back. Comfy. Relaxed. Ready for some leisurely sating of your thirst for technology information. Pop the keyboard on your lap so you can flip through the pages easily, and enjoy the diverse bouquet of latest technology that we've been working on collating, researching, and compiling for you.

Simple, no sweat, leisure.

If that doesnt work for you, consider this. It wont be long until were all consuming our written materials like this and wondering why it wasn't always so. So you could call it a public service. Were preparing you dear reader right now for the future. Acclimatising to this format in fact puts you one step ahead of the game.

Well, yeah. Guess were really just good okes.

Russell Bennett

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Aperture 3

Aperture 3, Apple's powerful photo editing and management software has been announced. There is a 30 day trial version available for download so consumers can test the over 200 new features.

It seems that in essence what Apple has done is actually take several nifty features from iPhoto and integrate them into Aperture to fill up on new features. Faces and Places for instance, both new in Aperture 3 have been in iPhoto for a while already. Faces allows you to organise photos with face detection and recognition tools. Places uses GPS data to explore photos based on the location of their shooting.

Other new features include Brushes, which enables precision retouching, and Adjustment Presets which lets you choose from many professional imaging effects. Slideshows within Aperture have also been given a shakeup and can now include photos, HD video, titles and layered sound tracks.

Apple doesn't like smut

Apple recently began the process of removing a plethora of 'overtly sexual' applications from the App Store. The Apps affected are of all types, from novelty apps, slideshows and even some games. Estimates put the number of impacted Apps at 5000, so far roughly 3% of all Apps have been removed from the App Store. Although the reasoning and validity of this anti-smut campaign by Apple remains an open debate, it surely begs a bigger question. If Apple doesn't like adult content, what about Safari, will they stop offering an Internet browser? Well of course not, but let's be honest here, internet browsers in conjunction with search engines are the biggest conduits for porn on the planet. And don't forget, Apple's Safari has Google embedded, the world's biggest search engine and thus by extension the biggest source of smut. Pot calling the kettle black I think. Remember people, just because something is there doesn't mean you have to consciously search for it, sometimes pay for it, download it, and finally use it. If you don't like it, avoid it.

iTunes 10 billion

The iTunes store has only been around since 2003 but in that relatively short time has already had a mind boggling number of songs pulled down from it. On the 24th of February the milestone 10 billion downloads mark was reached. In anticipation of achieving 10 billion downloads in iTunes, Apple was running a promotion in which whoever downloaded the 10 billionth song would win a $10,000 iTunes Store gift card, which is obviously now over.

Starcraft 2 closed beta

A Starcraft 2 closed beta launched towards the end of February, which indicates that the highly anticipated and somewhat infamous title is still on track for release mid 2010. The closed beta test however is primarily focused on putting Blizzard's Battle.net service through its paces, a service which started a lot of arguments about this game. Blizzard's decision to drop LAN play from a franchise that produced one of the most successful LAN games in history still leaves a sour taste in many a gamers mouth, but it makes sense then that the updated Battle.net, as LAN plays outright replacement, should be extensively field tested.

Alan Wake murdered

Alan Wake has had a very long and winding gestation period, not quite on Duke Nukem scale but still rather difficult. Now it seems that Alan Wake has finally been killed just like Duke, or at least the PC version has, it's still on track for the 360.

Remedy's PC adaptation of Alan Wake has officially been offed, but what has created a bit of a stir surrounding the issue is the reason given by Microsoft. Apparently certain games are just better experienced slouching on your couch in front of a big TV screen as opposed to slouching in a chair in front of your PC screen. Microsoft thus believe that the optimum manner in which to experience Alan Wake is via their own console, which of course has nothing to do with PC games being rampantly pirated and thus hauling in less cash. It's very simple really, Microsoft know it's going to be a big one so control it they must. Remedy themselves have echoed this sentiment with their belief that the Xbox 360 is a better environment for poor old Alan than the PC, but whether or not they actually believe that is another story.

Alan Wake is on track for a May release for the Xbox 360 in the US and European markets.

Civilization V

2K Games has made many a gamer very happy by announcing Civilization V, a series that has robbed so many of so many hours of sunlight with its 'just-one-more-turn' gameplay. Civ V is in development at Firaxis naturally, and is said to have a new combat system with hexagonal tiles replacing the square ones.

The switch to hexagonal tiles will apparently allow for more realism and deeper strategy, one would presume then that this is as a result of a hexagon having more sides and thus there could be multiple fronts in combat. Combat is being further advanced with ranged bombardment functions. The changes don't stop there though, there's a new engine, diplomacy is full screen and leaders speak their native language.

Civilisation V is due out in the States during their fall, so the project is fairly advanced already.

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ACTIVISION®

COD: WaW

The CEO of Activision Mike Griffith, the most ridiculously huge gaming empire in the world, revealed that Call of Duty: World at War is still hauling in piles of cash. This from a publisher that has titles such as Modern Warfare 2, World of Warcraft and the forthcoming Starcraft 2 in its stable, with that sort of repotoire available Activision might just prove that there is such a thing as too much money.

Despite being a 2008 release, COD: WaW has netted 8.5 million multiplayer map pack units sold, in a single year. Total downloads of all the map packs amounts to 10 million, and it's still a top performer on Xbox LIVE as well in terms of people actually playing the game. Coming in at roughly $10 a hit, it has been estimated that the WaW map packs earned Activision $100 million last year. Impressive from a 2008 game, to be still earning from beyond the grave in gaming terms. Must be all those zombies.

Given the success of multiplayer map packs for WaW, Activision is surely planning to roll out a slew of map packs for Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. The first map pack release for Modern Warfare 2 is already on the way, and considering how that title dominated sales charts it really does bode well for Activision making a prodigious amount of cash on DLC.

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DX10 finally forced

Let's face it, DX10 was a bit of a debacle. The only way to get it was via Vista and a lot of people had, and indeed still have a deep-set hatred for the system hog, sorry operating system. Personally I made it one day on Vista, formatted and returned to XP. Anyway, for this reason the gaming industry never really adopted DX10 outright because so many PC gamers were still sitting with DX9 XP machines. A recent survey on Steam showed that a huge 43% of their users were still on XP. Now however it seems that gamers might just be forced to abandon their apparently beloved XP and upgrade to either Vista or Windows 7.

The minimum system requirements of the forthcoming Just Cause 2 for PC from Eidos have been released and there is no support for XP. You have to be running Vista or above. Now this had to happen eventually and to be quite honest I applaud the industry for holding out this long. Had this been done without Windows 7 as an alternative there would have been riots in the forums, because forcing us off XP onto Window 7 is one thing, but forcing us off XP onto Vista would have just been cruel. Windows 7 is a worthy and commendable gaming platform, Vista just isn't.

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Fallout: New Vegas

Obsidian's Fallout: New Vegas is one of the most hotly anticipated games of 2010, and the talk coming out of the publishers Bethesda at the moment is certainly fueling the fire. As Obsidian rose from the ashes of Black Isle, the developers of Fallout and the legendary Fallout 2, New Vegas certainly deserves much of the hype it is getting. After all, as good as Fallout 3 was it lacked the darker edge and humour that permeated Black Isle's offerings, and now with sin city as a setting gamers could be in for a real treat.

Anyway, the big news is that New Vegas should feature over 100 hours of gameplay. The Vegas sandbox is roughly the same size as Washington DC from fallout 3, which was pretty epic, so the 100 hours claim certainly isn't unthinkable.

Also of interest is that this time round the player won't be vault dweller or as in Fallout 2 a descendant of a vault dweller, but rather a lowly courier. New Vegas kicks off with you shot and left for dead in a grave in the dessert surrounding Vegas. Whilst the game is set in a similar time to Fallout 3, New Vegas is a standalone story and no characters from the preceding game will appear on the strip. Vegas itself it seems is a functioning city and not just a dustbowl. It all bodes well because Black Isle's take on New Reno in Fallout 2 was one of the most loved locations from the entire series, and presumably New Reno would be the most similar city to Vegas.

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Infinity Ward Disaster

In what can only be described as an absolute debacle for the video gaming industry, Activision recently went insane and all corporate like when they decided to destroy Infinity Ward. You know, the developers responsible for arguably the most successful video game franchise of the modern era. Although at this stage nothing can be confirmed it seems that Infinity Ward top dogs Vince Zampella and Jason West were fired by Activision for insubordination and breaches of contract. One can only guess what Activision was thinking, firing the guys that had only a couple of months earlier created for them the most successful video game, ever. Since the story broke, it has emerged in court papers filed by Zampella and West that they are each looking for $36 million from Activision in unpaid royalties. There has also been speculation that part of the reason that Activision dumped West and Zampella is that they were talking to rival publisher EA, which if it does indeed turn out that Activision owes them each $36 million then I wouldn't be surprised that they were looking elsewhere.

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Zombies have it rough

So Activision's World at War we know is still doing really well, which means a lot of Nazi Zombies eating lead, but Valve have now revealed just how bad zombies really have it. A staggering 28,981,249,043 hapless zombies have been put down in the first two months of the game's release. 28 billion, that's just madness.

Valve being the cheerful bunch they are decided to put that frankly ridiculous number in perspective:

The entire population of the planet has been zombified and killed 4.26 times.

With the average height of a zombie being 6 feet, if you stacked them end to end they would circle the globe 1,322 times.

If you placed 28,981,249,043 rulers end to end, they would reach 28,981,249,043 feet in the sky.

Not to worry though, Valve has ensured it's fans that they'll keep making more so everyone can carry on zombie killing.

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Unreal 3 goes dimensional

Epic Games, the guys behind one of the best and most prolific game engines around, announced recently at GDC that their Unreal 3 engine would be getting 3D-support, just like the CryEngine 3. Epic announced that support for Nvidia's 3D stereoscopic Vision technology will be not only for full licensees of the Unreal 3 engine but also the free Unreal Development Kit (UDK). Now that both Epic and and Crytek have put their weight behind the 3D trend, it really would seem inevitable that it is the next big thing, and not just another fad. Epic and Crytek after all are two of the biggest players in the engine market. Epic haven't stopped the technology integration there though, they've also added the Steamworks software development kit from Valve Software. The Steamworks kit allows developers too implement several Steam services from copy protection to matchmaking and automatic updates. The Steamkit doesn't however lock the developer into Steam distribution, whilst the features are accessed via the Steam store front, the technology can be integrated in hard copy retail games as well.

Warner Bros. buy Batman

Warner Bros. has continued their expansion into the video game publishing industry with the recent acquisition of Rocksteady Studios, the developer responsible for the recent critical and commercial success Batman: Arkham Asylum. Rocksteady certainly is a studio on the move so the takeover for Warner Bros. really isn't that surprising, it isn't the first time a young studio develops a hit game and then immediately gets snapped up by big brother. Arkham Asylum has after all already shipped in the region of three million copies and a sequel is in the pipes.

Rocksteady Studios joins several other development and publishing houses who have recently been consumed by Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment division. Notable acquisitions include the publisher Midway and Traveller's Tales, the developer behind the LEGO series.

AMD 890GX

AMD unveiled a new 800 series chipset during early March, the AMD 890GX Chipset is designed to provide high definition entertainment regardless of budget. A bold claim indeed, but a brief look at the features list is impressive and does go a long way to proving AMD's claim. The imbedded graphics of the 890GX comes in the form of an ATI Radeon™ HD 4290 chip,

which isn't exactly a powerhouse but as far as integrated graphics go it'll do. The 4290 is only DX10 though, if you want DX11 you'll still need to get a dedicated graphics card. There is USB 3.0 support with the 890GX, although not natively but it is there via an on-board controller. Another notable addition is SATA 3.0 6Gb/s support. This new chipset has been timed well as AMD also recently announced a new 6 core CPU for their Phenom II range, the 890GX will naturally support the new Phenom II X6.

Intel unveil 6-core Core i7

Intel unveiled a new screamer at GDC (Game Developers Conference) in San Francisco, and inevitably it's a 6-core CPU, hot on the heels of AMD's announcement of their own 6-core, the Phenom II X6. In addition to being Intel's first foray into consumer 6-core processing, the Intel® Core™ i7- 980X processor Extreme Edition, codenamed "Gulftown", will also be their first 32nm chip and boast 12 computing threads. The 980 X EE naturally sports Intel's turbo boost and hyperthreading technology as well. The cores are clocked at 3.33GHz but light on electricity it won't be. L3 cache has been given a boost too, now at 12MB compared to the 8MB on Intel's previous performance demon,

the 45nm Core i7-975 Extreme Edition. The competitions Phenom II X6 should be phenomenally fast (sorry, I couldn't resist) but the Intel chips will probably be quicker. You'll no doubt have to pay heavily for that speed though.

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Sand Money: Chip Revenue

Nvidia recently released their financial result for the quarter ending January 31 2010, revenue was up 9% from the previous quarter to $982.5 million but still shy of the symbolic $1 billion mark. Compared to the equivalent quarter the previous year that figure is more than double, Nvidia only made $481.1 million during the quarter ending January 2009. Nvidia's revenue for the year was $3.3 billion.

Interestingly of the three major mainstream chip producers Nvidia sits at the bottom of the pile in terms of revenue. AMD made $1.646 billion in the same quarter, although it must be said that they have more divisions than Nvidia as they do own Nvidia's most direct rival ATI. Of course Intel beat them all bringing in revenue of $10.6 Billion for the last quarter. Lots of figures for sure but all you need to know really is that Intel still dominates the CPU world, Nvidia leads the GPU race but AMD makes more money than Nvidia because they play both games. AMD's graphics revenue was only $ 427 million if you delve deep enough into their results, which is significantly smaller than Nvidia.

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Intel expand Atom lineup

Intel launched a new Atom processor in March, the N470 is the fastest N series Atom and has a graphics chip built into the CPU itself. The netbook focussed chip is a single core processor running at 1.83GHz, with 512k of L2 cache and DDR2-667 support, which is impressive for something destined for netbooks the size of mice. Interestingly, hot on the heels of the Intel unveiling of the faster Atom processor, Nvidia announced they too had upped the netbook game on their side of the field. Nvidia's claims regarding the power of their new NVIDIA® ION™ graphics processor are very bold, but Nvidia does have a habit of delivering on their ambitious goals. The Nvidia chip is hoped to improve the performance over most netbooks tenfold as well as extend battery life by an equal amount thanks to NVIDIA® Optimus™ technology.

The ION chips will deliver HD content to netbooks, a fact Nvidia are rather proud of apparently as their press release features a very direct snipe at Intel: "Unlike netbooks with Intel integrated graphics, ION netbooks have the power to play amazing HD video smoothly from sites like YouTube and

support popular PC games like World of Warcraft."

The stylishly named Optimus™ technology used to improve battery life is a bit of a cheat really. What it does to extend battery life is analyse the task at hand and then select the better suited graphics chip to handle the task. So the heavy load items will be handled by the Nvidia discrete chip and the lighter undertakings will be the responsibility of the Integrated Intel graphics chips (The ION attaches to an Intel Atom Pine Trail CPU via PCI Express). So my understanding is that battery life is improved by not using the powerful graphics chip because that would suck power. Still, if the battery life of the system as a whole is improved , no one will complain.

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Google knows everything, they may as well do everything

Google seems to be expanding into every industry it can think of, even energy now. Google Energy is a wholly owned subsidiary of Google and has been granted Federal approval by the US government to buy and sell energy.

What this means is that Google can now get access to energy at wholesale prices, which they will use to power their data centres. Google operates many facilities worldwide to basically cache the entire internet which drains quite a bit of power apparently. It stands to reason then if Google can get a continuous supply of cheaper energy, their costs will be significantly reduced.

Further to their policy of rampant expansion into sectors other than search engines, Google's CEO Eric Schmidt recently made some interesting statements at the Mobile World Congress. When talking about the potentially invasive nature of the social networking explosion, he commented that "These networks are now so pervasive that we can literally know everything if we want to". Considering the privacy debacle surrounding Google's recent foray into the social networking sea with Buzz, a strange statement indeed. Remember this is a company that can already theoretically monitor a huge portion of internet traffic, and the CEO is going round saying they could know everything if they wanted to.

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ATI Catalyst

ATI's Catalyst driver suite is set for some extensive upgrades in the 10.2 and 10.3 editions. The modus operandi for monthly driver releases is generally just some tweaks and bug fixes, in fact for the most part users are hard pressed to actually see any difference whatsoever.

10.2 however has seen some major changes to how ATI's Crossfire architecture is implemented. Whereas Crossfire was previously integrated into the Direct3D and OpenGL drivers, Crossfire is now a standalone DLL which should allow greater flexibility for ATI in future Crossfire updates. The new manner in which Crossfire support is being offered also has another very notable advantage for gamers in particular. As many already know, Crossfire support in games could sometimes be revealed as a bit of an achilles heel for ATI, now however ATI can quickly make changes to Crossfire without having to send the entire driver suite through quality control, just the Crossfire element because of the separate .XML file. All you need to know though is that Crossfire will have better support in more games with less hassle. Lastly if you're one of those ridiculously lucky people with crossfired 5000 series Radeon's and multiple monitors, 10.2 now supports Eyefinity which was a no brainer really. Crossfired cards have also had their power usage optimised, if you're just doing low level desktop work the second card has the juice turned right down so you can save some energy.

There's even more on the way for the March release of 10.3, and whilst with 10.2 there was a clear focus on Crossfire, the main developments for 10.3 are Eyefinity centred. Features such as individual monitor colour adjustment and multiple display group support abound. So now you can setup two monitors as a single stretched display with a third as an independent display.

Very interestingly ATI have included a feature called Catalyst Mobility, which essentially means that the standard Catalyst download desktop users make every month can now be used on laptops with ATI graphics chips. Great, except that three laptop manufacturers want their products exempted from this update. So some companies don't want consumers, who bought their own laptops and now own said laptops, to keep them up to date, why?

Google acquires On2 Technologies

In yet another acquisition by the ever increasing Google corporate dreadnaught, Google has completed their merger with On2 Technologies. Given Google's strong presence in the video-on-the-web sector, it was always seen as a sensible move. On2 offered a variety of video related technologies, from advanced compression to encoding and embedding of video. As the company itself says, if your aim is to deliver video to a global audience then On2 is where you needed to go. Delivering video to a global audience is most certainly one of Google's aims, ever heard of Youtube? The acquisition, approved via vote by On2's shareholders is estimated to have cost Google $124.6 million, considering that they made $6.67 billion during Q4 2009 I think they can afford it.

Google high Speed internet

The internets most powerful overlord is planning to roll out a ridiculously fast broadband service in their latest move to take over the world, okay we made that last bit up, but don't rule it out.

The experiment will take place in a number of trial locations across the United States, the locations however have yet to be decided. For now Google is actually just trying to find interested communities and is welcoming responses from local governments and the public. Google plans to offer this service experiment to a minimum of 50 000 people but the potential for 500 000 people is there. So far a group of sixteen towns in Utah have expressed interest in the scheme, other areas had better hurry though the 'Request for Information' period ends March 26.

Here's the remarkable bit though, the network that Google is planning involves fibre-optics direct to homes running at an astonishing 1 gigabit per second. To put that into perspective, the world's fastest broadband can be found in Japan with speeds approaching 100mb/s, so 1000mb/s is frankly mind boggling.

Intel and Nokia unite

Silicon giant Intel and mobile powerhouse Nokia have joined forces to create a new mobile operating system called MeeGo. What they have done is a sort of fusion between two of their existing operating systems, namely Nokia's mobile Maemo and Intel's netbook focused Moblin.

MeeGo will apparently be both Linux based and open-source, not surprising really as both Maemo and Moblin are open-source Linux based systems. The range of possible applications of MeeGo is very extensive given its foundations. Smartphones, netbooks, tablets, connected TVs and even in-vehicle technology has been bandied about. MeeGo supports X86 and ARM architectures and should launch in the second half of 2010. MeeGo will not apparently impact Symbian, Nokia's smartphone OS, Symbian will still be used on their cheaper smartphones.

So here's an interesting question, considering that there have been rumours in recent months of Intel and Nvidia making eyes at each other, which if that turns out to be true could create a completely dominant mobile platform provider. That's is just speculation though.

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Microsoft and Yahoo finally link up

Microsoft and Yahoo have, after what can be described as at the very least a very trying engagement, linked up their search engine divisions. Normally with any sort of big deal involving Microsoft there are several competition bodies jumping up and down frantically, this time round though both the U.S Department of Justice and European Commission have okayed the deal. That might having something to do with another company actually controlling the search market, so for once Microsoft is the one trying to open up the market and not tie it up.

The fusion of the companies search engines will primarily be an under the hood affair, so the consumer is unlikely to notice the difference. Both Microsoft and Yahoo will retain their individual branding for Bing and Yahoo, but the engines will be powered by Microsoft. As Microsoft will handle the search tech, Yahoo should handle the advertising but not all of it. Yahoo it seems will only deal with premium search sales for both sites, the rest will still be done separately.

It remains to be seen if even when combined whether or not Google can be challenged by this new alliance. In Europe for instance Google garners 90% of the search engine traffic, so it's not as if Bing and Yahoo combined will immediately become market leaders.

Mozilla patches

The Mozilla foundation has updated older versions of their popular Firefox browser, but the latest version, Firefox 3.6, already has the patches preinstalled.

Although there were a handful of flaws in these older Firefox versions that were remedied, one in particular stands out. It stood out not for the flaw itself but rather who identified it, namely Microsoft, who passed along the information following some security research. This is the second instance in recent times that Microsoft has displayed such altruistic behaviour, they also recently identified vulnerabilities in Adobe's Acrobat and Reader and promptly informed Adobe.

Of the flaws detected, three of the bugs would have allowed hackers to embed malware onto a users machine. During Mozilla's investigation of crashes caused by the bugs instances of memory corruption was found, which could indicate malware.

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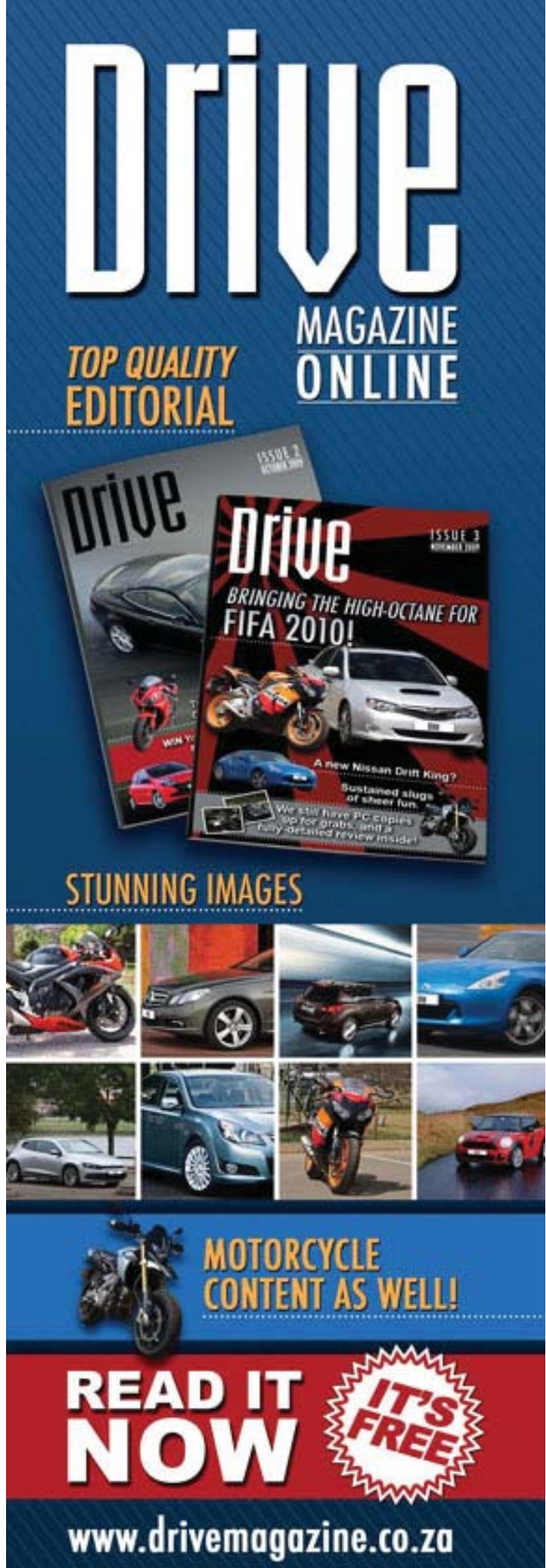
Nvidia's 3D revolution continues

So Nvidia's sterescopic 3D technology is great right? It is, except of course for those stupid goggles you have to wear, just as the video gaming industry drags itself out of the perception that all gamers are murderous geeks with absolutely no grasp on reality, Nvidia goes and tells us all to wear oversized glasses straight out of the 80's. Goggles just aren't a good idea, neither the beer or 3D variety. Now Nvidia has continued their 3D drive, but extended the technology to TVs as well. Nvidia 3DTV Play software technology allows you to connect any Nvidia GPU powered desktop or notebook with HDMI or DVI to 3D TVs, a technique they are showcasing in conjunction with Panasonic. They are traversing America in the coast-to-coast 2010 Panasonic Touch the Future Tour, where consumers can put Panasonic's recently launched Viera range of full HD 3D TVs through their paces. Panasonic are bundling their active-shutter glasses with Viera TVs, which work in conjunction with Nvidia GeForce GPUs and software drivers to seamlessly integrate Nvidia and Panasonic's respective takes on 3D.

Nvidia's GF100 chips on the way

Nvidia has launched their next generations of graphic chips. The highly anticipated GF100 Fermi cores strangely won't bear 300 series names, nope Nvidia has decided to once again upset graphics naming conventions to confuse us all. The first cards to arrive will be the GeForce GTX 480 and GTX 470, effectively jumping straight from 200 to 400. The 300 numbers instead have been reserved for OEM only parts which will really just be updated and then rebranded 200 series cores. 300 series cards seem destined to only be available in prebuilt OEM systems, not that anyones complaining as all eyes will be on those 400's.



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Let's save PC Gaming

PC gaming isn't dead no matter what your console buddies say, but it is struggling in some regards. This column however isn't just a cheap attack on consoles, no, I don't really think that constant argument is sensible. If a game is fun and you want it, get it for the platform most convenient for you, end of story. Back to saving PC gaming.

So apparently the peril in which PC gaming is currently residing has to do with the games themselves and platform being far more susceptible to piracy. In other words publishers and developers are moving away from the platform because we're all a bunch of snide pirates who thieve software at every opportunity. Now human nature being what it is we're never going to change that, if people can get hugely expensive games for nothing without fear of reprisal, they will. I'm not judging just pointing it out. Sounds like a bad situation, but what's wrong with advertising in games? That would solve a lot of problems.

Think about it, if advertising is integrated into games the more a game is pirated the better for the developers. They can charge more for the advertising, that's how so many entertainment industries work. Take this very magazine, it's free so you can't really steal it but in essence the principle remains the same. The more people who read the magazine the higher one can charge for adverts, so by all means steal it. Even if there was a cover price, as long as we could track how many copies were thieved no one minds. If a similar philosophy is adopted for gaming, the big corporates could stop moaning about everyone stealing their stuff because it wouldn't actually matter. If you switch the primary source of income from sales to advertising you solve the theft problem in one swoop. The result would be stronger PC gaming.

Okay so there are obviously some problems with this, in fact I'm sure there's some hate mail appearing right now in my inbox at the very mention of in-game advertising. And keeping with the magazine analogy, the first problem many people have is that he who pays the bills is always right in business. So would a journalist give a bad review to a product from a company who essentially pays his salary via advertising? Right now however, you the gamer hold that power. Sure you get ignored most of the time but for the most part developers and publishers try and deliver the games you want, otherwise you wouldn't buy the things and thus pay their salaries. If that becomes the advertiser calling the shots so to speak, they may not have absolute gaming nirvana in mind. Not ideal I will admit, but if it means more money is plowed into PC gaming and thus more games appear on the platform it is something worth considering.

Then of course there is the question of how advertising would be implemented without detracting from your gaming experience. For this I would recommend adopting the television model, which can be annoying but it sustains an industry we enjoy so we tolerate it. I'm talking of course about ad breaks, now that sounds worse than it is for gaming so just hear me out. Almost every game in the world already has breaks in them, they're called loading screens. You sit there doing nothing staring at for the most part a pointless background and a loading bar. If all I had to endure to ensure PC developers stay afloat was stare at an advert for Coke then I say great. Yes there will be developers who abuse it by creating artificial saves and the like but I still say it is the lesser of two evils, the other evil being PC gaming receiving a stake through the heart courtesy of consoles.

Advertising in-game itself could also be an option, if a character needs a drink what's wrong with that drink being Coke? Yes that can be a bit cheesy but once again, at heart what we all want is a strong PC gaming industry. If that's what it takes then so be it.

Kyle Stone

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Mac Action

What an interesting month it has been in Apple world with the launch of the iPad. I'm still not sure about the name but I'm sure Apple has an entire marketing team that knows more than me. New and exciting as it is though, it has been around in the rumour mill for several years and is probably not what a lot of people expected.

So, what exactly is an iPad? Is it a touch screen laptop or is it a big iPod touch. It certainly isn't a big iPhone, even if you do buy the GSM enabled version, it will only work for data not voice. I think the answer is that it's somewhere in between.

The downside of the iPad in terms of laptop functionality is that, in common with the iPhone, software comes in the form of Apps. Now Apple will tell you that they want to ensure that all software is totally compatible but it does restrict the number of third party programmes available. And it also means that programs that do things, which are classed as "improper" such as torrents, will almost certainly not be allowed. I'm sure it won't be long before jailbreaking tools will be available but you don't have any such restrictions with a MacBook.

There is a version of iWork available from the App Store so you can use it for quite a lot of your daily work but typing an article such as this one using the onscreen keyboard would be challenging to say the least.

As a big iPod touch it doesn't really work either, imagine trying to clip it onto your belt at the gym.

So by now you might be thinking that I don't really like the concept of an iPad. Nothing could be further from the truth. I want one and I want one now, even before I've seen one in the flesh as it were. You see, being an Apple product, its an icon of style and you just know it will work out of the box without having to fiddle with complicated settings. The interface will be intuitive and even the least tech savvy user will be able to get the most out of it.

What it does do very well is Internet and something which is vey close to our hearts here, digital magazines. It's about the size of a print magazine so you can slip it into your bag when you go away but you can take an infinite number of digital mags with you. And when you get there, you have Internet on a decent sized screen, you can view email attachments and photographs. And it can do all of your office tasks albeit using the onscreen keyboard.

The iPad is a device that I would prefer to take on my travels than a laptop assuming I didn't have any heavyweight number crunching tasks or multi page documents to type. What the iPad is, is a gadget and there's nothing wrong with that. It is a stylish easy to use gadget and a Gadget that does have real every day use. The secret is not to try to put it into a pigeonhole, just buy one and enjoy it. Yes you may still want to keep your MacBook and your iPod but who cares?

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Emancipating your cellphone

I avoided it for four whole years, but at last this year, just couldn't any longer. Upgrading. Yes the last time my contract was due for an upgrade, I claimed something sleek and pure consumer, handed the new handset to the wife and stuck to my businesslike older generation.

My reticence has been partly because I still love my old phone. I got my Nokia E61 as part of the original seeding/ambassadorial program in the country, for this very magazine. They gave us several handsets and tasked us with going out there and spreading the word about its brilliance. And boy, did they get their mileage from me. Because I genuinely felt all warm and fuzzy for it. Steadily, over the course of the last four years or so, my E61 has actually turned me into a bit of a cellphone enthusiast really – not just how they look but the hardware and software environments behind them and the unbelievable versatility of these pocket-sized platforms!

"You'll lose it all! Contacts list, emails, settings! It works perfectly as it is, why risk it?"

As a business phone the E61 is still perfect. The default email client isn't ideal perhaps, but the Symbian OS is just so pleasant that installing Incredimail to circumvent this shortfall was interesting, fun - definitely more than a chore. Built-in WiFi, a useful voice recorder, nice big, bright screen, a bit of a cramped qwerty keyboard which you quite quickly got used to, even decent battery life for such a fully-featured phone!

But the other part of the reason why I was still stuck on "old technology", and this as a technology journalist, was the fear of migrating. The automatic data-hoarder within us shouts "You'll lose it all! Contacts list, emails, settings! It works perfectly as it is, why risk it?"

We've all done it a few times, and it is always quite a hassle. Most of your contacts come over with your SIM, but there are always a few that were being stored in the phone's memory itself, and you never quite know which ones

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so you can just call them up and manually transfer them later. But that's just the contact list.

On my phone I also have a few dozen recorded voice clips of monstrously clever ideas dreamed up while in that alternate reality of hard driving, a hugely stacked folder of notes from meetings, functions, and presentations I've needed to remember things from, emails from five separate accounts, and pages and pages of SMSs that could be useful, but didn't necessarily need to be kept.

Oh, I also had a mountain of software installed on the E61 – like I said I just love tinkering with that OS! But they probably wouldn't make the move.

To make the process as painless as possible, I upgraded to a newer E-Series, Nokia's sexy little E75, based largely on the fair-sized keyboard and the fact that I do more and more emailing on the move these days. I hauled it out and dutifully let it charge for the 16 hours the box demands. What, 16 hours you say? Well that's a little ridiculous...

Anyway, once setting the standard stuff like time and date, the next option was to start an app called Phone Switcher. Turns out this little tool has been built specifically to eliminate migration headaches, and takes you through the straightforward steps necessary to connect, via Bluetooth, with your older devices and literally just pour all the relevant data out of it and into your shiny new one.

You can specify the data you want transferred individually or by groups, hit OK and then accept the incoming Bluetooth request on your older handset, and just like that all your info and locally-stored data moves out over Bluetooth into the newer phone.

"Of course you can also accomplish all of this pretty easily using the surprisingly clunky Nokia PC Suite."

A word of caution here. My E75 shipped with default settings quite naturally and in common with every other one on the planet, so after 30 seconds of inactivity it switches to a sleep mode, in the process turning off the power-hungry Bluetooth equipment in the interests of longer battery life. So you need to sit with the phones in your hands and just every few seconds hit the joystick downwards to keep them from hibernating, and you from having to go through the straightforward setup process again when the transfer fails halfway. Or you could skip this step for now, go and disable the Bluetooth sleep mode, and then launch the Phone Switcher later from your apps menu.

Of course you can also accomplish all of this pretty easily using the surprisingly clunky Nokie PC Suite. Connect the old phone and back up the lot onto your PC through this application, then just connect the new one and restore it. Job done.

As predicted, either method of migration doesn't move the installed software apps which is a bit of a shame. Not a surprise at all though considering they're different versions completely

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of the Symbian OS, so it's impressive enough that at least contacts, calendars, and all your notes are transferred in the slickest, smoothest manner imaginable.

An area I really wasn't anticipating problems, and stumbled straight into them with, was with my emails. See the email client on the E61 isn't great shakes, but fortunately a little app called Incredimail is a superb replacement, so I was handling all my mail requirements in this third-party app. Sadly there is no Incredimail for the E75, and I couldn't find anything to replace it apart from a R150 "Connect Suite".

So it turns out the built-in email client for the newer phone is, if anything, slightly worse than the not-so-good one of the 61. Although it claims to support Mail for Exchange as well as regular POP3 email accounts, it doesn't seem to like POP3 at all – at least none of my six mailboxes were happy. So instead you have to use an online service, accessible at http://email.nokia.com. So you sign up, after all it's free with the purchase of the phone. And you add your POP email account details in here, from your PC, through a browser, which then sends your cell number a couple of SMSes, and voila, your emails with full push functionality are suddenly there, in the same recalcitrant mail client which wasn't happy accessing this box moments ago.

Now the real weakness of this whole Nokia Messaging system is, that it doesn't really work. It says you can register up to 10 email addresses. I was able to register one of my Internet-hosted email domains, and my Gmail box, but then the system stopped being helpful. "We cannot process your request, please try again later," it told me every time I entered the details for a new email account. And it did that for seven days, until I stopped trying. Nor did the Nokia Europe email support team help me at all. "Yes your account is active and fine on our side, we see no reason why you should be having a problem. Please try the website again," being the best answer to this continuing problem.

"E-Series to E-Series however, there's not a lot to be worried about."

In spite of the emailing glitch, this particular migration was actually remarkably seamless. Really, the built-in application that auto-launches for you on startup did the basic job quite perfectly, provided you didn't let it drop off into slumber. The other more niggly details you do have to expect have to be sorted out separately. All my notes were there, and available, all my contacts, voice recordings, just there.

I do know that migration on an iPhone is pretty slick. But then, you can really only migrate from iPhone to iPhone, so the range of migration options isn't that great. But I think next time we repeat this manner of guide, will use handsets from completely different manufacturers.

E-Series to E-Series however, there's not a lot to be worried about. And they are still excellent, versatile handhelds despite lacking the glam of the touch screen smartphones.

Russell Bennett

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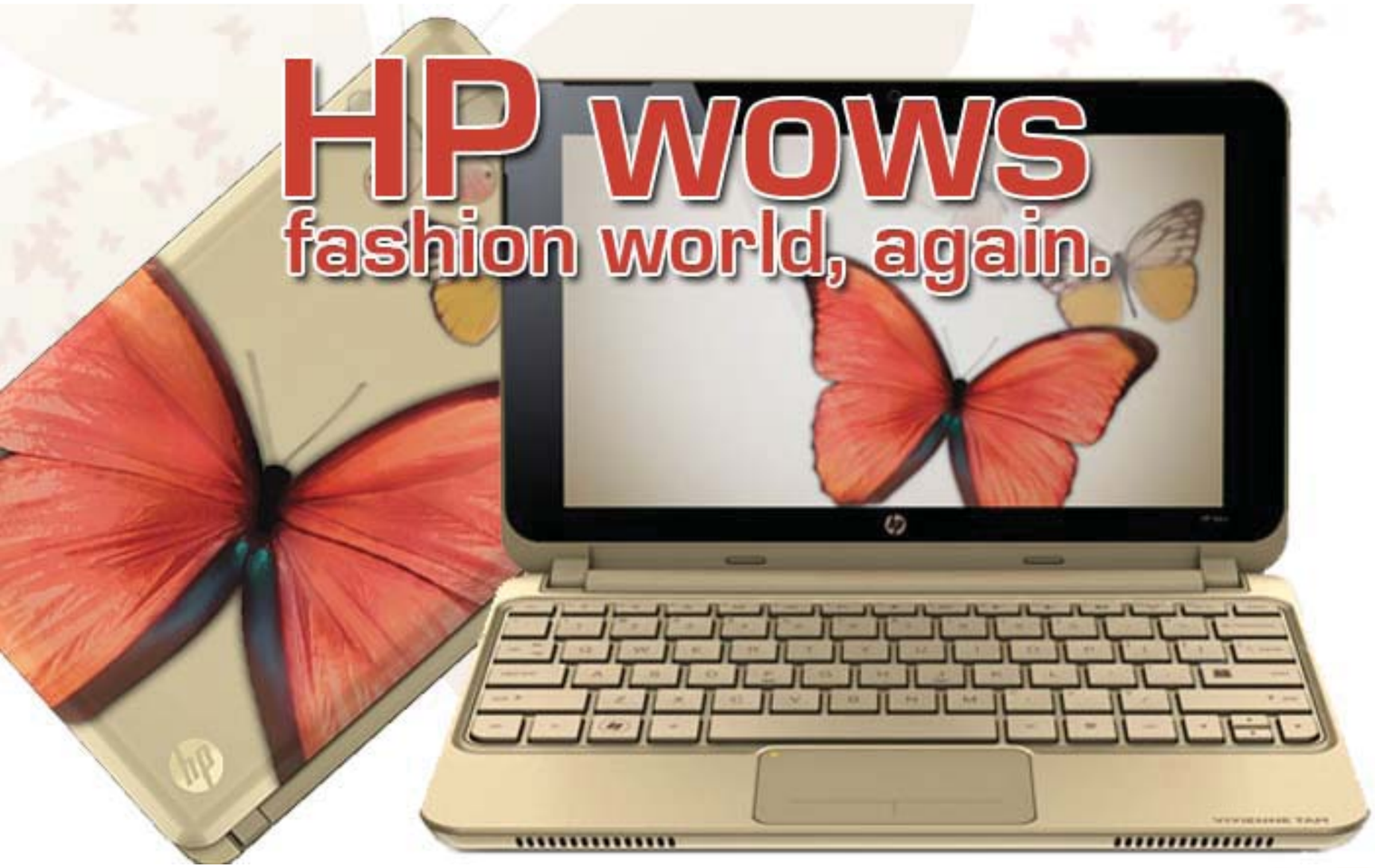
HP wows fashion world, again.



It's very interesting how the world, and the "popular opinion", shifts. So drastically, so completely, swinging from extreme to extreme as regularly as a veritable metronome.

I was a heavy geek for being "into" technology just a decade and a half ago. So-called "regular" folks tuned out when I started to talk microprocessors, PCBs and display resolutions – just like they still do (even more so of late) with motoring-speak in fact. Let alone the highly fashion-conscious, who straight-out shunned geekdom as, well, geeky.

And today, HP's latest netbook, the already geek-sexy Mini 210, is launching complete with a high-fashion Vivienne Tam edition, available to local working fashionistas by the end of April.

This leading international designer has turned this compact slice of the latest tech into a clutchable icon of seething style. The prettied-up Mini had a high-profile debut on the catwalks of the New York Fashion scene, mixed in amongst the highly-anticipated Vivienne Tam spring collection its design echoes.

"As a fashion designer I have always found inspiration in bringing contrasting worlds together," said Tam. "I use computers in every aspect of my life so it seemed natural to marry fashion and technology. Together with HP, we created this movement of fashionable tech accessories with the second-edition digital clutch."

More than just a laptop skin, the lovely Butterfly Lovers design is carried-over in the OS itself, with a custom theme matching the dreamy exterior installed by default. There's also some custom software installed, targeted at the music and fashion industries specifically, to help these artistic pros be more efficient and effective day to day. As well as, of course, exclusive accessories bundled with your new ultra-portable system.

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The 2010 Sony Extravaganza

Oh boy, have I missed the ICT industry. Naturally I've continued my involvement as I've delved into the very exciting motoring sector, but very much at the fringes, looking in. It's good to be right in the middle of it again.

Just as a case in point, last month Sony invited us to its 2010 product showcase, and since the brand is so hugely involved with FIFA, they pulled some strings and held the event inside the almost-completed Soccer City stadium here in Jo'Burg, and as well as a walk-through of their exceptional, across-the-board product offensive we also got a guided tour of the location itself. Two weeks later, when the 94.7 FM guys and gals were blubbering about the exclusivity of their own tour of Soccer City, I was able to nod sagely and say; "Oh, I've been on that tour already..."

Anyway enough about fragile journalistic egos being fed. But before getting into the actual technology content itself, a short bit on the stadium...

It truly is a beautiful construction. Although the seven shades of brown and off-red used for the panels of the Calabash itself look a little haphazard at first, when it's explained that it's meant to look like the African pot is cooking over an open fire, it makes quite a lot of sense all of a sudden. I'm still not sure I'd call the colour-scheme beautiful, but it is right, just as they wanted it.

Inside it's, well, much more significant than it actually looks driving past. It is massive. Seating for over 90 000 people is no small matter. And it's a beautiful, vaulting, unobstructed view of the action you get with every single seat, there being no visible support columns at all in the ovoid seating areas.

"...last month Sony invited us to its 2010 product showcase, and since the brand is so hugely involved with FIFA, they pulled some strings and held the event inside the almost-completed Soccer City stadium here in Jo'Burg,..."

There's another touch I really appreciate inside. Although the seats are dominantly orange, ten bands of black run out from the centre of the pitch, two seats wide although running across the seating in a seemingly random manner. Not so at all. Originally, there were actually meant to be only 9 of these bands, each one pointing to one of the other official FIFA 2010 stadiums dotted around our country.

However, 9 being an unlucky number in

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African superstition, a 10th band was added, and it points straight to Germany, indicating the "entrance point" of the FIFA spectacle to our shores, then distributed across our nation by the other 9. Poetry in architecture, really.

Then there's the pitch, all R12-million worth of it. Perhaps even more incredible, is that the identical R12-million arrangement has been set up in three other nearby stadiums, and is being prepared and cared for in the same meticulous fashion. That's so that if something goes tragically wrong with this pitch, one of the "spares" can literally be forklifted over here and replanted to ensure no disruption of the festivities. Extravagant, perhaps, but nevertheless quite reassuring.

The one element which jarred slightly, for me, was the players' tunnel. It's been crafted to look like a horizontal shaft in a gold mine. It's just a touch Gold Reef City to me, but I'm a pedantic sod at times. It isn't like they made stadiums in the UK appear like coal mines.

Anyway, overall it's an astounding structure, packed with astounding numbers, sky-high hopes and aspirations, and a profound amount of thoughtful and well-executed engineering.

In many ways, like the Sony products being showcased today...

Image reproduction at new levels

Also because of the FIFA 2010 spectacle, SA is playing host to the introduction to the world of Sony's latest 3D TV series, part and parcel of the new Bravia Monolithic line. With the eyes of the globe focussed on the greatest spectacle on Earth playing out in our stadiums, on our land, Sony correctly sees this as an ideal platform from which to promote the 3D TV concept.

At the showcase Sony SA displayed its first ever Full HD 3D BRAVIA TV for the home, the LX-900 Series. Featuring 3D integrated technology, Motionflow PRO 200Hz, LED Backlight technology and built-in Wi-Fi access, the BRAVIA LX-900 provides the ultimate home entertainment experience, perfect for uncompromising AV enthusiasts. As well as this fully-featured LX set, NX710 and NX810 models which are 3D-ready but feature half the framerate (100 Hz) will be introduced this year, in fact a few months before the LX-900 hits retail shelves.

In addition to the 3D capabilities, enjoyed with the aid of a pair of active-shutter glasses which ship with every unit, the LX-900 is also easier than ever to connect to the home network thanks to built-in WiFi, and takes full advantage of this connectivity with the Bravia Internet TV and Video services on offer. Hours and hours of high-quality, streaming entertainment from across the globe in your lounge, provided you've got a decent broadband link of course.

The company states that prices will be in-line with existing Bravia products, for similar screen-size and refresh rates which is nice. We must say, the demoed unit worked but didn't exactly leap out

Sony Bravia LX900

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Sony Bravia EX700

Sony Bravia EX800

at us, so to speak, although to be fair the conditions in the showcase area weren't ideal despite the best efforts of the project management team. We're looking forward to spending some more time with this product to get to see the real advantages first hand.

As well as the 3D-capable units, Sony is introducing a new Bravia line based on the Monolithic design paradigm. Three new Bravia models, branded NX, EX, and BX are either already available, or will be very shortly, in your local electronics outlet, each featuring sleek new design elements and the latest TV technology from the company.

The NX is the most fully-featured of the trio. It packs integrated WiFi and is billed as the Web-savvy AV-enthusiasts dream come true, integrating seamlessly as it does the world of TV and the wonders of the Web. There's also a Bravia Engine 3 image controller and MotionFlow with Image Blur Reduction running at a full 200 Hz, all naturally running off a full HD LCD.

"The Monolithic Bravia EX offers similar viewing perfection,..."

The Monolithic Bravia EX offers similar viewing perfection, but WiFi is only available as an optional USB-based adaptor, and the MotionFlow tech only runs at 100 Hz here. What it is richest in, are actually energy-saving functions such as Ambient Sensor, LED backlight, and advanced Presence Sensor technologies, minimising power consumption without compromising on picture quality. The Ambient Sensor will automatically adjust the picture brightness, according to the amount of ambient light in the viewing environment, to lower power consumption. Similarly, the Presence Sensor will automatically turn off the picture when the sensor does not detect the viewer's presence.

Finally, the BX is more of a "traditional" HD TV, just one with the sleek aesthetics of the Monolithic design paradigm. It's big on style, but also offers superb image quality, incorporating the same Bravia Engine 3 imaging processor and full HD resolution as pricier options in the Bravia family.

Image capturing ready for WC 2010

Sony is also focussing heavily on the actual capturing of images during this frenetic season of world-class soccer action, primarily on the lovely Alpha DSLR range but not exclusively so. These models are specifically highlighted as the baseline cameras for the intriguing "Be an official Fan Photographer" promotion, as all customers who purchase the α330 DSLR bundle package, the official camera for the 2010 FIFA WC, stand a chance of spending some time practically right on the pitch with the contingent of professional press photographers from around the globe!

α330 DSLR

In terms of the technology however, the real highlight is the Exmor R CMOS sensor, recently perfected and now finding its way into the range, primarily through the high-end.

Exmor R is a CMOS sensor featuring Sony's independently developed back-illuminated structure, with the aim of

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creating a camcorder or camera capable of taking exceptional footage and images, even by candlelight. This sensor is approximately twice as sensitive as a conventional front-illuminated CMOS sensor and also features very low noise properties.

Sony has succeeded in the development of a CMOS sensor with 1.75µm square pixels and a speed of 60 frames per second.

In a back-illuminated CMOS sensor, light is directed onto the silicon substrate from behind, allowing light to be used with a level of efficiency not possible with conventional front-illuminated pixel structures. Photographers can now create smooth, high-quality images in low light settings, including night scenes.

Sony has succeeded in the development of a CMOS sensor with 1.75µm square pixels and a speed of 60 frames per second. Mass-production of this new chip, the Exmor R back-illuminated CMOS sensor, has now commenced.

α550 DSLR

The DSLR-A500 and A550 Digital SLR cameras offer high fame rate and high sensitivity with low image noise thanks to this new technology. Additionally, the incorporation of this CMOS sensor in the 2010 Cyber-shot HX and TX series allows for the new Intelligent Sweep Panorama function, in addition to the inherent image advantages particularly in traditionally tricky light conditions.

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Cyber-shot TX7

Cyber-shot DSC-HX5V

Integrated for the first time in compact digital cameras, on the Cyber-shot TX7 and HX5V, is Full HD AVCHD movie recording, a feature previously available only on Handycam camcorders. Just like the Handycam range, the Cyber-shot TX7 and HX5V are able to capture high definition movies with smooth subject movement and sharp images even under low light conditions, while all Cyber-shot models now support SD/SDHC memory cards as well as the proprietary Memory Stick format.

Finally, on a more personal note, Sony unveiled the interesting Bloggie pocket-sized mobile HD snap camera perfect, as the slightly annoying name suggests, for heavy bloggers to capture and upload video to the Web with.

The 5.0-megapixel MHS-CM5, MHS-PM5 and MHS-PM5K can record high definition videos of a resolution of up to 1920 X 1080, as well as take photos. With a built-in USB arm and embedded Picture Motion Browser

Sony HD Bloggie

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(PMB) Portable software, the bloggie enables seamless uploading of videos and photos to popular sites via a web-connected PC (or Mac). With the PMB Portable platform, users can also easily pre-select images and videos from the bloggie before uploading to their personal social media channels, allowing them to video blog effortlessly.

Next-gen computing

As well as this stellar lineup of imaging equipment, Sony also showcased an all-new Vaio lineup capitalising on the latest technology developments, primarily at Intel and nVidia. The entire range from ultra-portable through netbook and notebook and right up to the desktop is being revitalised this year with the latest CPUs and GPUs from

these giant manufacturers. As well as the new components, all Vaios in SA are fully covered by the Vaio International Repair Service.

The ultra-thin X-series continues with Atom Z540 and 550 processors and driving the cause of the SSD in the consumer space. The W-Series netbook now gets an optional built-in 3G solution, and the Y-Series continues with the low-power Core 2 Duo CPU at its heart. The biggest changes are in the corporate-focussed Z and S-Series models. The S range gets the brand-new Core i3 and i5 platforms mated to potent nVidia 310M GPUs with dedicated 512MB frame buffers, and the Z is upgraded to Core i5, and i7 in the range-topping variant, and 1GB 330M GPUs. The highest-spec Z also sports 8GB RAM and a 256MB SSD, and both models gain fingerprint readers for high levels of security.

This year does spell the end of the Vaio TT-Series however, with November marking the final month of production.

Home users get similar tech upgrades in the E, W, and F-Series ranges, the big 16.4" screen of the range-topping F sporting a Core i7 720QM processor running 1.66 GHz stock and capable of adjusting, as per the load requirement, to a stonking 2.8 GHz. Per core. Desktop offerings remain largely unchanged.

"It's a dazzling display, in Soccer City, the Calabash. The home of WC 2010."

Sony did have its lovely Vaio L-Series multitouch all-in-one desktop at the showcase as well. One of our roving reporters enthused about the L towards the beginning of the year, which

he saw while attending the motorshow in Germany (Frankfurt, to be exact), so I was interested in getting a closer look myself. The 24" multitouch display powered by Microsoft Surface is great to use, very much the equal of the iPod touch/iPhone but on a much larger scale. Unfortunately it won't be coming here, thanks to the integrated TV tuner and sticky SA regulations on kit like that.

However, a smaller 20" version without a TV tuner is likely to hit shortly after mid-year, so that's still something to look forward to.

All told then, a comprehensive and impressive lineup of advanced, enhanced, and generally enchanting products across the board from this international giant. Displayed with the full, indomitable weight of FIFA behind them the full advantages of that association. It's a dazzling display, in Soccer City, the Calabash. The home of WC 2010.

With the actual products to match the heavyweight hyping, the actual spectacle to match the grand posturing, and the technology to stand out from the best, Sony are on to a bumper year ahead. Useful, on the economic dawn after the recession.

Russell Bennett

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Brownouts - the silent electronic equipment killer

By Robert Brandt, APC Product Specialist at Drive Control Corporation

The problems of South Africa's national power utility are well known, however in the last year or so many organisations have been lulled into a false sense of security as load shedding and rolling blackouts are no longer publicised and thus seem to be a thing of the past.

While most people know of the dangers of blackouts to electronic and IT equipment, there is in fact a silent killer that often goes unnoticed and unheeded. Brownouts, or temporary reductions in the voltage of power supply, are equally dangerous and can wreak havoc on computers, servers and other equipment if measures are not taken to protect environments from this event.

Brownouts also known as undervoltage can be caused by natural phenomena, such as storms, which disrupt the power grid. They can also occur as a result of an overload on the electrical system when the power utility is unable to provide enough power to meet demand. Voltage reductions such as this may be incidental or may actually be conducted deliberately to serve a similar purpose to blackouts when demand is high.

When power voltage dips, people may not even notice or may experience it as a dimming of lights. However the underlying damage caused by these occurrences is often not apparent to the end user. While a brownout may not 'fry' equipment the way a total blackout does, most technology requires a constant supply of clean, uninterrupted power in order to function optimally, and brownouts force equipment to work harder on less power, which can severely reduce its lifespan.

For example, computer processes take strain in brownouts, which can cause overheating and resultant failure. They can also cause keyboards to fail and machines to freeze or crash, leading to lost or corrupted data, and computer disk drives can suffer from write failures. Electrical interference also in-

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creases during brownouts, which can adversely affect the operation of computers, wireless networks and other IT infrastructure.

All of this can lead not only to the premature failure of expensive equipment and the logistical hassle of having lost or corrupt data; it can also have a significant negative impact on productivity. In combination these instances add up to increased expense, lost revenue and at the end of the day a shrinking bottom line.

In a country that experiences a large number of electric storms, and also has a power utility with as many problems as South Africa does, it is imperative to proactively address issues such as brownouts in order to minimise future implications.

One solution is to turn off all sensitive equipment during brownouts. However this is often not feasible as organisations cannot tolerate the downtime this would cause, and often it is brownouts are difficult to detect. This means that for most businesses it is necessary to implement a technology solution to deal with the problem.

The simplest solution to ease the trouble of brownouts is to make sure that all power points have power filters or power protectors on them. These are designed to cut the irregular power supply before it can damage equipment. Power filters are easy and relatively cheap to install. They are self sacrificing, and will be destroyed before equipment is in the event of a power surge or power sag, saving expensive equipment from failure.

"The simplest solution to ease the trouble of brownouts is to make sure that all power points have power filters or power protectors on them."

Voltage regulators, power conditioners and isolation transformers can also assist in keeping the power supply clean and steady and ensuring that expensive equipment is not affected by brownouts.In addition, a UPS with a power filter can provide backup power when the main power fails, allowing time for proper shutdown procedures to be implemented. Most UPS systems will also regulate the power from the wall as a result, eliminating power sags and minimising the effect of brownouts on expensive equipment.

"Brownouts have the potential to cause massive disruptions to business and damage millions of Rands worth of expensive electronic and computer equipment in South Africa..."

Brownouts have the potential to cause massive disruptions to business and damage millions of Rands worth of expensive electronic and computer equipment in South Africa as a result of unclean and unsteady power supply. Once a brownout is happening it is too late to do anything about it, so a proactive strategy is needed to protect equipment from this silent killer.

Specialists in the field of power supply and regulation can assist your organisation to outline the best strategy and solution to suit your needs and ensure that business is up and running at all times, business as usual.

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GROUP TEST

Core strenghs - MECER Xpression

Intel Core Family

We were fortunate enough to, the week before Intel's local launch of the new Arrandale processor family in South Africa, be playing with the full lineup of new Arrandale-powered Mecer Xpression notebooks, featuring an example of each of the new Core family of chips, i3, i5, and i7. So when Intel did make the pretty long-awaited announcement, they didn't really have any information we hadn't already seen with our own eyes.

But allow me to go into at least some technical detail on the new processors here, before actually delving into the Xpressions themselves.

With Arrandale, as opposed to Clarksfield which is the more desktop-oriented slant of i7 chips, Intel now has a complete family lineup. No less than 11 Arrandale chips were launched at once, starting right at the bottom-end Core i3 330 up to the badassed Core i7 620M. These are the first 32nm CPUs available to the notebook market, the die-size and new integrated graphics components delivering crucial space enhancements to mobile computing as a whole. But technically, they're identical to the desktop Clarksdales, featuring two HyperThreaded 32nm cores, integrated 45nm Northbridge, and even more promising support of the Turbo

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capabilities due to TDPs of 35W – quite high against the last-generation but still low enough for there to be significant thermal headroom.

If you're so old school that you still tend to judge CPU performance largely by frequency, as I tend to be, the lineup is a little confusing. The low-end i3 models are clocked at default at 2.13 and 2.26 GHz, which is also where the Core i5 starts, and clocks up to it's ceiling of 2.53 GHz. But then you have the Core i7 stretching right from 2.0 to 2.66 GHz! Core i3 and i5 models make do with 3M L3 cache, Core i7 gets the full 4MB, which is the same as desktop Core i5s/i3s for some reason.

As for that all-important Turbo function, the biggest downfall of the Core i3 range is that it doesn't get this feature. But the i5s and i7s can now easily clock several 133 MHz speed bins higher on the fly, given the thermal headroom to safely run hotter. An interesting element of the on-die Intel HD GPU solution is that CPUs which support Turbo functionality also have the ability to trade-in CPU performance for increased GPU clock speeds when you have the time to play.

That integrated GPU is also intriguing.

"...Intel is clearly assaulting the mobile space with conviction with this latest CPU family."

A decent integrated graphics solution threatens the biggest volume segment of the discrete GPU market, the entry-level, and this latest Intel HD offering has a huge step up in performance terms over anything discrete, being implemented on the die itself as it were and not going out over a PCI-E bus to communicate with the central processor.

Either way, Intel is clearly assaulting the mobile space with conviction with this latest CPU family. Already the undisputed raw computation performance king, the company continues to develop, advance, and innovate to deliver exciting new products, the fruits of their massive R&D efforts. Even for the "tock" stroke of the famed "Tick Tock" cycle, the adjustments made in Arrandale are more significant than you might at first think, and at the launch local partners were demoing everything from huge, not-really-mobile gaming laptops complete with latest-gen 5970 GPU (Asus, of course), to iMac-like multitouch PC/screen marriages (Pinnacle Micro).

But let's then move on to our Xpression range of demo machines, to find out just what sort of advantages the new processors actually provide.

There's one utterly brilliant feature each of this Xpression range has in common though which has to be pointed out up front. They're user-upgradeable, in fact they're so easy to modify on your own it's almost as though the company is encouraging it, which it in actual fact is. Just a few screws gets you into the guts of the machine, and from there you can upgrade not only RAM but your CPU itself. Which, as techies, we really like.

M770

This is the biggest, most powerful, and most expensive machine in the three-

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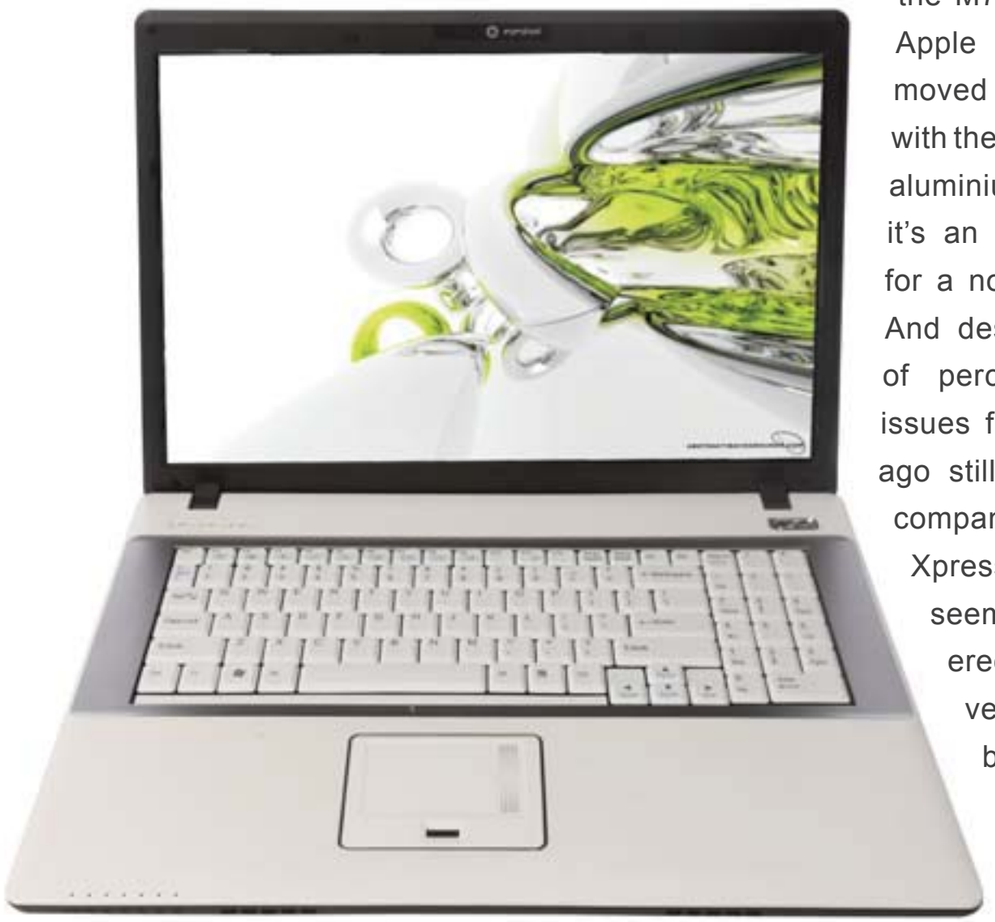
notebook range. For just under R11 000, you get a latest-gen Core i7-720-QM processor, 4GB of DDR3-1333 RAM, a big 500GB HDD, and a healthy 17" screen.

The added spec pretty common across this new Xpression range, includes a built-in webcam (1.3MP on the cheaper Xpressions, 2.0 on the 770), ATI 4570 discrete graphics (except for the cheapest offering), 802.11 b/g and Draft-N specification, an HDMI port, integrated Bluetooth, and even an integrated biometrics solution in the form of a neat little fingerprint scanner.

I do like the white-heavy look of the M770. With Apple having moved away from this with their latest milled-aluminium MacBooks, it's an excellent look for a notebook today. And despite spectres of perceived quality issues from long long ago still haunting the company, the entire Xpression range seems well-considered and show off very impressive build quality!



M770

Then, more than being richly-featured and very well-built, the M770 is also an absolute beast. It monsters our PCMark Vantage test posting scores on average 20% higher than paced against the outgoing Penryn-based Core 2 mobile processors. There's a huge slice of poke just waiting to be utilised in this chip, possibly more than many might ever need.

At the end of the very lengthy full PCMark run, this top-end Xpression had scored 2970 Marks which is right up there. There's just no doubting the performance potential of this platform, you can feel it just doing day to day tasks in Windows 7 – like a thoroughbred sports car the machine is immediately responsive, never laggy.

The graphics system is OK but not utterly top-notch, and although you can play the latest games you will have to lower the overall detail to also have anything approaching smooth gameplay. But, it can be done. And this is still a business-focussed notebook priced to sell, not a massively expensive gaming monster-mobile.

Windows 7 itself, pre-installed on the entire Xpression range in one form or another, seems to adore the Core family, posting ludicrous "Windows Experience Index" ratings of almost 7 on the processor itself and a monstrous 7.5 for RAM performance despite "only" being clocked at 667MHz, or old DDR2 speeds, although the Windows Aero performance which also relies on the GPU isn't as impressive.

"Yes, there's a lot of power packed into this pretty attractive and sturdy-feeling notebook that's for sure."

Yes, there's a lot of power packed into this pretty attractive and sturdy-feeling notebook that's for sure. There's almost no point labelling the platform the fast-

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est mobile processing available today, as these days that pretty much goes without saying. Who is there to compete against the rampaging chip giant after all? The Core family was already indomitable in Clarksdale form, and although Arrandale is a more minor raft of changes (hence the Tock), it still brings useful performance advantages, thoroughly beating out its own predecessor even.

W765CU

The marketing for this laptop rather brazenly claims in a roundabout way that the previous generation of Intel hardware is basically obsolete and heading for the dumpster. Whilst I personally think there's life in the Core 2's yet, I know for a fact they can pedal the latest games out there, the fact remains that the newer chips from Intel are very impressive.

That then is the selling point of this product, it has a Core i5 M 430 CPU running at 2.27 ghz for each core and the performance emanating from the Intel silicon is impressive. In conjunction with an ATI 4570 Mobility Radeon and 2GB DDR3 RAM the laptop will run any game out there, sure if you push up the resolution and detail to max framerates do drop off, but this is a laptop coming in at less than eight grand. It must be noted though that as with any mobile graphics chip of previous generation technology, crank up the anti-aliasing and framerates become less than smooth.

It ran Crysis Warhead with consistent frames. Modern Warfare 2 also didn't present a problem. When benchmarking with Unigen and Resident Evil 5 however performance did wane slightly. I suspect that had a lot to do with the older graphics chip, a theory further backed up by very poor anti-aliasing performance. So in went PCMark Vantage, and the conclusion was definitive. The GPU score was low whilst the CPU and memory performance remained fluid. The GPU really is the weak link here, what with a latest generation CPU and fast DDR3 memory, it would have made more sense to go with the equivalent 5000 series of GPU from AMD, that would've been great. That's just nitpicking though, this isn't a gaming laptop but a general computing one, so Mecer's decision to focus on general computing performance is acceptable, and as I said it will play any game with lower settings anyway. The last important piece of hardware to consider is of course the battery, which stayed alive long enough, especially considering the powerful hardware.

W765CU

So the hardware and thus performance on offer is certainly up to scratch for this price bracket. Having a good set of internal components does not guarantee a good laptop though, more so than with a desktop because by it's very nature it is more mobile. Mobility means that the build quality of the casing must be taken into account, and the Mecer is actually quite good on this front. It is slim and compact for a PC laptop, and has a sturdy feel to it. I say for a PC because on this issue no PC laptop can match a MacBook, but in the PC market the Mecer does an admirable job.

The only niggle I had with the exterior of this laptop was the trackpad. It wasn't the easiest to use initially but after a while I did adapt. The trackpad itself isn't a smooth one but has what I presume to be a sort of non-slip surface. Surely for a device thats job involves a finger sliding over it would

"It ran Crysis Warhead with consistent frames."

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want a surface that improves sliding, not hinder it. As I say, once you're used to it there's no problem but I just didn't like it. The trackpad also warms up after prolonged use, nice in winter I suppose. The heat doesn't make the trackpad unusable, I'm sure most won't even notice so that's only a small issue.

Whilst the Mecer struggles somewhat with high res and high detail gaming, that's not what it is designed for. So as an aggressively priced mid-range laptop with an impressive Core i5 CPU, all the neccessary ports and a compact design this Mecer is a worthwhile purchase.

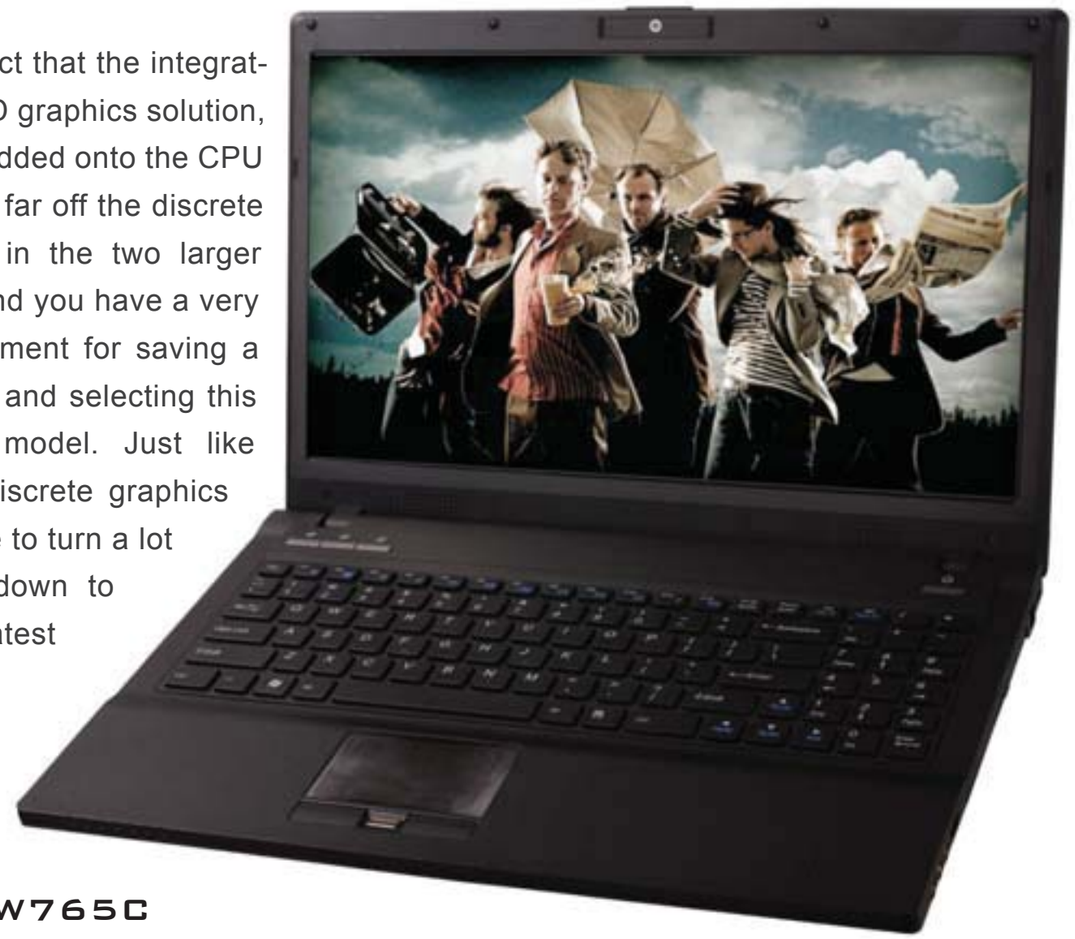
W765C

And right at the bottom of this new, 3-product family, the W765C. It's a R6K entrance into the world of the latest computing technology, featuring a Core i3-330M processor running at 2.13 GHz, 2 GB of the same DDR3-1333 as the others, a 320GB HDD and a 15" TFT display.

You also still get the biometrics, as well as the smaller niceties like Wireless-N, webcam (1.3MP), and Windows 7 pre-installed. By default it's 7 Home Basic which isn't nice, but you can upgrade to Professional if you choose.

What the Core i3 lacks in this family of CPUs, is the Turbo Boost functionality. It does not scale up its frequency as needed, just runs at its specified 2.13 GHz all day long. But when we launched into PCMark, it suddenly didn't seem like that much of a shortfall. Just a couple of hundred points, the i3 managing a superb result of 2761.

Add the fact that the integrated Intel HD graphics solution, now embedded onto the CPU itself, isn't far off the discrete ATI parts in the two larger models, and you have a very good argument for saving a few grand and selecting this cheapest model. Just like with the discrete graphics you'll have to turn a lot of detail down to play the latest games, but it'll manage very similarly – a touch laggier but no huge margin.



W765C

What's more, this graphics subsystem on i5/i7 platforms will benefit from being similarly overclockable through the Turbo Boost function, a feature which could have made the perceived GPU performance delta all but disappear.

We also always find a 15" notebook is that much more sensible as a mobile companion. That much easier to carry, not so important if your notebook is merely a trendier desktop which moves around with you, but positively key if you're constantly on the move but have to have computing functions while you're on the move, more than the average smartphone can provide at least. It's also a smaller draw on the battery, meaning longer battery life in the same sort of usage cycle, although in this case the 17" Xpression gets a larger battery than the others which offsets this advantage to a certain degree, but again trades portability (weight, in the case of the battery) for extended functionality.

"...the 765C is just as pleasantly solid to the touch as the pricier Xpression options."

And the 765C is just as pleasantly solid to the touch as the pricier Xpression options. It does feature the same odd, dimpled trackpad that the i5-powered 765CU has, which none of us really warmed to in the office. In fact after

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W765C

But on pure performance, and now even more so with these latest updates especially the IGP-on-die, the Core lineup still has to be considered the most potent processor platform on the market today.

Now, also, in mobile trim.

several hours of use I found it actually started making my index finger simultaneously numb and tingly.

Still, this baby Xpression really highlights just how convincing Intel has made the Core family, and not just the high-end record-seeking parts either, but also the more affordable end of the price spectrum, just about the only market position which still sees it "troubled" (in relative terms) by AMD, who offer their range-topping processors at prices in-line with mid- to low-end Core parts from Intel for killer price-per-performance ratios.

Liked

Processing power
Great build-quality

Disliked

Discrete graphics
Knurled surface on touchpad

Russell and Kyle

For full specs, visit http://www.mecer.co.za/notebooks

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HARDWARE REVIEWS

To the power of N

Nokia N900

For the first couple of days you have your hands on a Nokia N900, you may find yourself thinking "What have they done with this? This, is supposed to be their iPhone killer? Not likely!".

That's because there are a lot of things that get in the way of this perceived objective. The big touchscreen for one looks superb and has excellent WGA resolution, but is the older-tech transistive type so just isn't nearly as responsive. I mean, it's for this reason that Nokia has actually built a stylus into the case, but honestly, who uses a stylus on a touch-screen handheld device today? Then there are limited and sometimes off phone functions – it took us days to find that you send SMSes via the Conversations application in the main menu for instance, although we did come to like the instant-access to your contacts list through doing nothing more than sliding out that full QWERTY keyboard and starting to type in the first letters of the name.

"...the instant-access to your contacts list through doing nothing more than sliding out that full QWERTY keyboard and starting to type in the first letters of the name."

And while buttonless touchscreen phones look cool, there's a very useful reason why Apple still has that home button on the face of the iPhone. The N900 doesn't have one, and it can get annoying having to tap back through layers of the Maemo 5 OS to get to your main desktop area rather than just press one button.

Finally the design is just nowhere near as polished, literally. The Apple handheld might be fairly large, but it's slim, and feels slimmer still thanks to those tapered edges. The N900 is big, blocky, and thick. In a way, it feels a workmanlike device.

It's when you make one single discovery about the N900 that everything really comes together, and that is the following fact. Nokia themselves are quite

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clear about the N900 not being Nokia's answer to iPhone and co. No, the company is actually pitching the N900 at the gadget-freak, the developer who loves to delve into new digital environments and fiddle, the tablet user who would also like a phone function on his handheld computer.

The whole architecture is tuned to this objective. That lovely high-res screen, the ARM Cortex X8 600 MHz CPU, and the Linux-based Maemo 5 OS. Intel and Nokia recently announced their joining of forces on the mobile platform front to create MaeGo, and you can see why Intel is interested in this platform when you play with the N900 for a while.

It's a proper multitasking OS to start with, complete with a tasks panel which gives you a thumbnail view of the open applications and allows you to shut them down simply by tapping the large red X in the top right of their icon. There's a full suite of connectivity options, Bluetooth for the PAN and WiFi for the LAN. In fact, the WLAN scanning functionality is pretty robust and nicely seamless, as soon as you enter a known wireless zone the N900 just defaults to that as the data connection, and then back to 3G once you've left, for a seamlessness of data rivalling the iPhone.

Speaking of seamlessness, we like the way the N900 handles Google IM in particular. Set up a Google email account, with login credentials saved to the phone, and without you doing anything Google Talk contacts will just be there, in your contacts list. You are able to connect with these contacts on an IP-based voice call if you like, or through the IM channels, or, naturally, with an email.

"...the N900 packs a 5MP camera with LED flash and digital zoom, covered by a neat plastic slider at the back of the device."

When the European market first got their hands on this device, they bemoaned the lack of Ovi Store support for easily getting new and useful apps onto the phone, and Nokia has clearly been listening as it's incorporated now. There is not the vast breadth of apps that the App Store enjoys, but other than sheer volumes it's a very similar experience, similar layout even. I found an well-known open-source adaptation of a modern gaming classic Starcon 2 called Ur-Quan Masters which is a flawless rendition of this renowned old game, which I quite liked.

In fact the overall phone interface is slick, responsive, and powerful. With Maemo 5 Nokia has managed to get all the coolest bits of Symbian into a slicker, prettier, more touchscreen-oriented package. There are some brilliant, almost-unique features as well, like the full support of Flash content. And speaking of multimedia, the wide net of supported media (excluding M4V for some reason), great screen and 32GB built-in capacity make watching movies on the device a joy. There's even a cable out to your TV in the box making for a truly portable little video solution.

On the consumer side, the N900 packs a 5MP camera with LED flash and digital zoom, covered by a neat plastic slider at the back of the device. This camera does a much better job than the shocking 3.2 on my E75, which suffers badly from lazy shutter syndrome, but still isn't exactly wow, and takes quite a long time to process and store images especially with geotagging enabled. It is able to take widescreen-res snaps which is fairly nice, but certainly not essential stuff.

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Business users might not appreciate some of the more limited office functionality of the N900, but as a journalist I found it great. My two primary office apps are an email client and some form of Notebook app, the N900s email handling is excellent while the very simple Notes allied to the slide-out keyboard had me typing-up several articles on my phone just for the fun of it. Support for multiple email accounts and that automatic WiFi operation meant I found myself using my actual laptop very little at the office during the N900s time with us, while at home I happily typed articles on the couch while keeping my wife company watching the TV, something which should theoretically work with a laptop too but just doesn't – especially in an SA summer!

With just a 1320 MaH battery, that big and high-res screen, potent CPU, and various radio-signal connectivity options constantly scanning the airwaves, you'd expect battery-life to be a problem. Look it isn't exactly great, but with moderate use I got a day and a half pretty consistently, after which you just plug it into your machine via USB to power it back up again. Very comparable to the iPhone then, for what is essentially a more powerful and versatile handheld computer.

It isn't as immediately user-friendly as the iPhone either, but once you do have a handle on the ins and outs of the OS it's intuitive in its own right. The zoom function on the excellent Chrome-based browser for instance, compared to the mutlitouch pinching gestures placing your finger on the screen and then rotating clockwise to zoom, anticlockwise to go back out, seems a bit clunky. But once you're used to it, it gives the most precise control of your zoom level possible, it really does.

It's kind of a phone which blows a bit hot and cold then. iPhone users won't like it. Even HTC Hero fans aren't likely to take to it. Too big and bulky and unstylish, not enough of a fun consumer gadget with a solid mobile phone added-in for good measure.

But to the stated, ultra-niche target market – genuine mobile computing enthusiasts and the terminally gadget-obsessed, well, it's quite positively glorious. And I think I have to confess, this description obviously fits me to a Tee because I want one so badly, even if my E75 does have a nicer slide-out keyboard and far sleeker, more elegant design. But I would swap out to an N900 quicker than a heartbeat.

"Business users might not appreciate some of the more limited office functionality of the N900, but as a journalist I found it great."

Liked

- Maemo OS
- Ultimate versatility
- Seamless connectivity

Disliked

- Physically bulky
- Sluggish touch-screen response

Russell Bennett

For full specs, go to http://mea.nokia.com/find-products-en/devices/nokia-n900/specifications

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Tough, but pretty

Canon Powershot S90

The Canon S90 is a small but rugged little compact from Canon designed to appeal to professional photographers that need a pocketable alternative to their SLR. The S90 offers users the ability to record images in RAW format and for those professional photographers that like a bit of control, Manual, aperture priority and shutter priority are available. The camera is infinitely customisable again demonstrating its leaning towards the serious photographer. The other indication is in the price. At R 5500, the S90 is eye wateringly expensive.

As soon as you lift the camera out of the box, the impression is one of impressive build quality and that continues as long as you use it. It has a stylish black finish with a large bright clear 3 inch rear LCD screen. Again leaning towards the serious photographer canon has abandoned the megapixel race and gone for a 10 Mp sensor similar to the high end G11. Smaller sensors with several million pixels crammed in lead to nosier images at high ISO settings. Using a sensor with fewer pixels actually produces a better overall image.

"The S90 is a well-built fully featured compact that should leave you wanting for nothing."

The S90 is equipped with the 35mm equivalent of a 28mm-105mm lens, which boasts an f2 maximum aperture at the wide end. Around the lens barrel is a rather interesting control ring performing one of a range of functions. There is a button on the top of the camera used to choose which particular function you would like to use the control ring for. Options include manual focus, ISO setting, and Exposure compensation, shooting mode or manual zoom. The ring has click stops and feels quite sturdy.

Shooting modes are set using a control wheel on the top of the body, which turns easily with your thumb. The control wheel on the back of the camera handles most other settings and can be a bit fiddly. There is a built in flash, which is stored neatly in the top of the camera and protrudes when required. It does pop up when it detects low light conditions in automatic modes. It does push your finger out of the way when you're not expecting it to pop up.

There are of course all of the ease of use features available in common with modern compact cameras. There is a face detection autofocus mode as well as blink detection so that you don't get pictures of your subject with their eyes closed. There are several preset shooting modes for the less experienced photographers. Some are quite interesting for example, fireworks and underwater. I'm not sure when you might use that one since the camera isn't waterproof. All of the traditional settings are there, Sunset, landscape and portrait among others.

A camera with all the features in the world would be pointless if the picture wasn't up to scratch. I'm happy to report that the S90 performs magnificently with sharp, well-saturated images. The very critical eye will see some edge distortion but that's only to expected with a lens this size. It does without doubt outperform many a compact with a sim-

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ilar lens range.

The S90 is a well-built fully featured compact that should leave you wanting for nothing. The ruggedness is the most significant feature but it comes at a price.

Steve Allison

Canon S90	
Likes	Dislikes
Build quality / ruggeddness	Price
Features	
Image qualit	

For full specs, go to http://www.canon.co.uk/For_Home/Product_Finder/Cameras/Digital_Camera/PowerShot/PowerShot_S90/index.asp?specs=1

Bigger, better?

TomTom Start

When we theoretically divvied-up the trio of TomToms upon their delivery, I happened to be over at Ignition TV doing that thing, so I was assigned the Start. It's the smallest, least sexy I guess.

It was the one I'd really have chosen though. Thing is, as a motoring journo as well I'm always in different cars -

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two a week most of the time sometimes more. And your'e never quite sure if there'll be satnav in the next one. So my own little Mio GPS is always just carted from car to car.

So the bigger ones with the similar but slightly richer featuresets, which are really at their best suckered to the screen of one maybe two cars, are just that bit too bulky, their large screens a touch too fragile seeming for my demands. And it isn't only for this reason that you might prefer this more compact model.

Technically it's really similar to the bigger ones. Your menus are laid out the same, the functionality is largely the same, and it's administered through the same TomTom Home application on your PC.

Just smaller. More compact. Wieldy in fact.

And it even has more space than the 750, on board, so its not at all bad. Finally, its the most affordable, so it can lead a tough life.

I just like it, for all those reasons.

Liked
Compact nature
TomTom environment
Disliked
Nothing

Russell Bennett

For full specs, go to http://www.tomtom.com/products/product.php?ID=986&Category=0&Lid=28

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Navgation Goes Live!

Kind of.

TomTom Go750 Live

Just one step down from the Go 9xx range, the Go 750 is basically a range-topping TomTom GPS. Retailing at almost R3000 it seems pricey in todays marketplace, but I recall when navigation was just getting popular and I got mine, the R2500 that it was worth was gasped-at as absolute peanuts. Still, it's more than twice the price of the entry-level Start also tested this month.

But then, it is packed with positively must-have features. OK, so, really, the

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must-have features of a GPS are on both XXL, Smart, and this Go 750, as in an excellent set of map data, in the case of this manufacturer community-updated data thanks to Map Share, a solid routing engine, intuitive user interface, and timeous clearly-understandable directions for the driver. So in fact the 750 is rich with don't-really-need-but-it's-cool-so-I-kinda-want features.

Like voice control. Don't get me wrong, this would be immensely useful if it genuinely worked, like it does on Audi's and their integrated systems. But I kept finding the fairly limited speech-recognition system only worked if I gave it the best possible chance by leaning as near to the microphone as possible. Watch though, software updates through TomTom Home will improve this feature quite quickly.

Also the text-to-speech function for reading out the names of upcoming streets being directed past or onto, has some trouble with the technicalities of English, so isn't really going to be too intelligible when it comes to uniquely African names. It can be quite amusing listening to it try, oh so hard, however.

The PR who had provided these test units had fairly gushed about the "safety camera" (read thieving unlawful traps) warning feature, and I was worried it was going to turn out like the Garmin one – largely useless with warnings seemingly every 400 metres, but it is definitely less intrusive here.

Then there's the latest addition to this model, the Live services. Accessed via an integrated 3G network infrastructure the TomTom grabs data about any journey you have plotted from various sources to do things like give you a more accurate ETA based on real congestion on the programmed route which is nice, but not yet infallible.

I did have one pretty major gripe with the device though. Although it's the most expensive unit of this trio, TomTom Home reports it as having the least on-board memory to install new content onto. So for instance I wanted to update the base mapping and routing engine to the new version, a 46MB update, but it refused to saying there wasn't the space on the device to perform this operation. The only way to make space, would have been to delete the old software first, raising concerns about that potentially turning the device into a brick. So in the end, I didn't.

I did do the GPS Locator Hotfix though, and was again slightly surprised that the 750 remained slower than the XXL, and about on par with the Start, when it came to satellite acquisition on startup.

Although it isn't a lot more than the XXL, I'd have to recommend the larger-screened model unless you're a real gadget-boy who must have all the possible toys, even if they are largely gimmicky, crammed in to their chosen device. Simply. Must. For no good reason other than that you can.

If that is you though, the Go 750 would be just the perfect TomTom for you. The underlying basics are extremely sound – intuitive interface, great data, good routing, and the extras fun toys to entertain yourself for a bit.

Liked:

Interface
Routing options

Disliked:

Satellite lock-on delay

Russell Bennett

For full specs, go to http://www.tomtom.com/products/product.php?ID=1013&Category=0&Lid=28

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PRINTING WITHOUT LIMITS

Epson TX700W

Can you remember when a printer was just a printer? Those days are long gone. The new Epson TX700W is an all in one printer, copier, scanner and card reader. Not only that, it will work connected to a computer via a USB cable or it can be a network printer using either an Ethernet or WiFi connection. As a piece of office equipment, it covers pretty much all the bases. Home users will also find the TX700W a handy tool with its photo quality prints and PictBridge capability.

The TX700W is a stylish looking unit finished in gloss black with an aluminium effect strip around the centre. It certainly won't look out of place in the average home. And that is where most of these devices will be used although small businesses will find it quite a handy tool. There is a 2,5 inch full colour LCD screen on the front making menus nice and easy to read.

Setting the printer up as a network device can be a bit tricky. Our printer gave itself an incompatible IP address, which required a manual override. Home and small office users are usually not technical enough for that so Epson will surely be receiving several support calls. Once it is set up on the network though, it really is brilliant. The printer will connect through the wireless router that most Internet users already have. That frees users to locate the unit wherever they have free space rather than being restricted to parking it within cable length of the computer or router.

The TX700W has an output resolution of 5760dpi and a convenient media tray that allows you to leave the A4 paper in one section and postcard size photo paper in another. The memory card slot works not only for PictBridge printing but also as a network general card reader. It supports SD/MMC, XD Cards, Memory stick and Compact flash. As an added bonus you can scan a document directly to a memory card.

Image quality is on a par with the best whether you are printing, scanning or making colour photocopies. There is even a CD tray for printable discs. Photographic prints are outstanding although we had a problem. Borderless prints are excellent but as soon as we chose to print with a border, the image quality dropped off and there was clear banding on the print. This is probably cured easily by tweaking some settings but again, home and small office users may find that a bit of a challenge.

All in all a first class stylish all in one device but make sure you have a technically minded person to help you set it up.

Likes

Cablefree printing
Card reader capabilities

Disliked

Slightly fidgety setup
Quality issues with borders

Steve

For full specifications, visit http://www.epson.com.au/products/multifunctional/stylusTX700W_specs.asp

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Small footprint, big sound

SP-i160 Mini Portable Speakers

The SP-i160 speakers from Genius allow you to take your music anywhere. And they do so rather impressively considering the diminutive size of the unit, giving you a rather high volume and decent enough base. Although at maximum volume the sound quality begins to break up a little, the speakers were still able to produce clear sound louder than the speakers on my 13" laptop, which allowed me to watch some videos on my laptop that were otherwise inaudible. The SP-i160's also look stylish and fit in nicely with the iPod's mobile music world, they have built in batteries and can be charged via USB.

Just plain

SP-i150

The SP-i150 is just a speaker, whereas its sibling the 160 is a stylish white with a cute design, the 150 is a simple black shaped like, well a speaker cone. So it certainly doesn't look that interesting, but then that's not its primary function. Sound quality is good though, identical it seems to the 160. You can plug the 150 into your mp3 player, computer, handheld gaming device, well anything with an audio jack really and will be able to share your music with a group easily. The 150 unfortunately only has a 3.5mm audio jack, which is fine considering that 3.5mm is the industry standard, it still would have been nice to include a 2.5mm adapter like the 160 does. Both products are virtually identical where it matters, but the 150 loses to the 160 on looks and has an extra audio jack converter.

For full specs, go to http://www.geniusnet.com/

Kyle Stone

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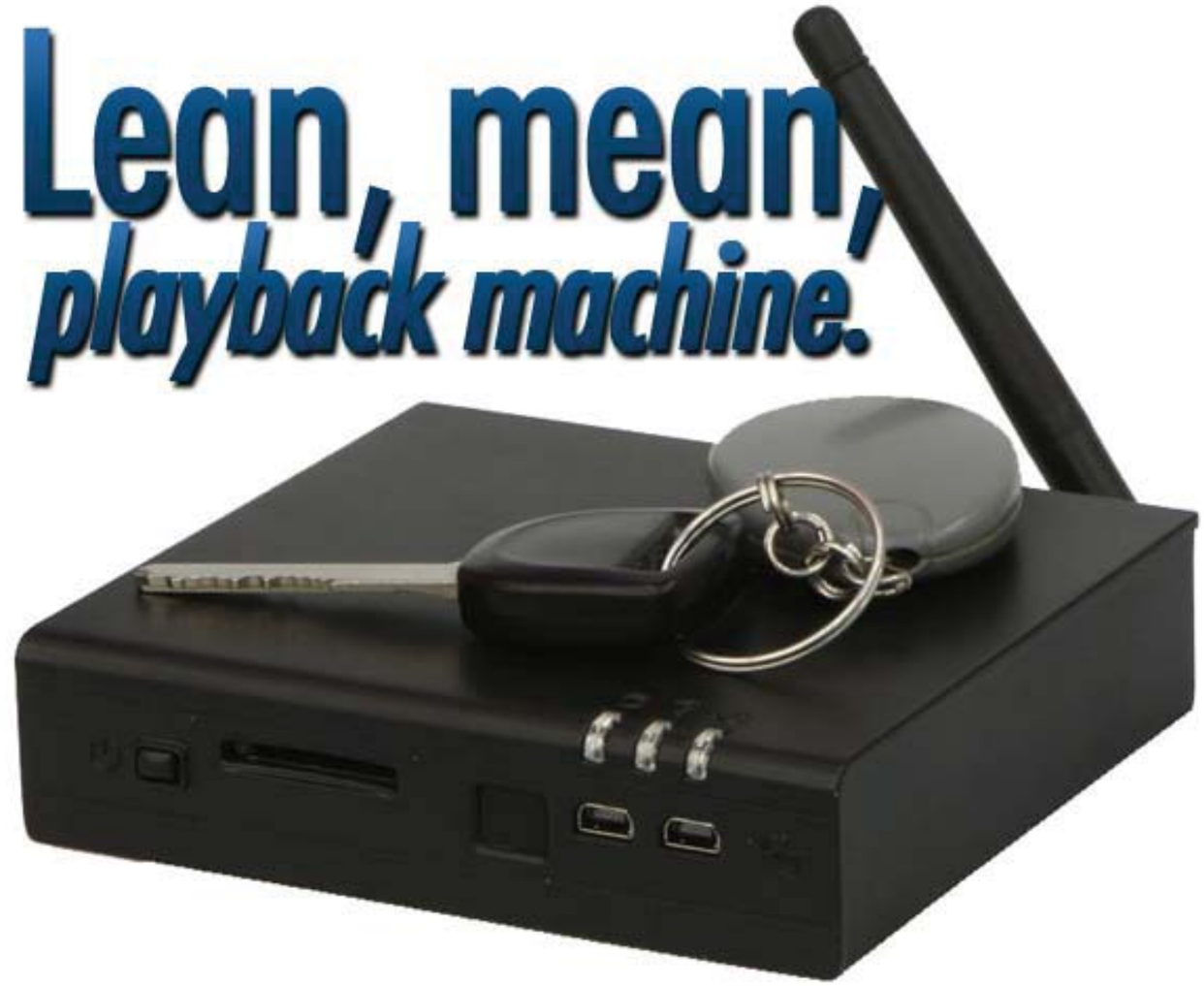
Lean, mean, playback machine.



Fit-PC2

Tired of seeing your power bill soar everytime you upgrade your desktops to the latest, greatest, and most power-hungry computing you can get your hands on? Well, sir, the CompuLab FitPC2 might well be something worth considering.

The Fit PC capitalises on the older Atom CPU, a 1.6GHz Z530 to be exact, running on a US15W SCH chipset to deliver decent nettop computing capabilities at a reasonable cost and very low power consumption. It's equipped with Intels GMA500 integrated graphics control so can output full HD signals without the decode duties bringing the platform to its knees (the decode is offloaded to the GMA500).

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Let's talk about the unit itself for a moment however. It's tiny, as you'd expect a nettop to be, and includes a 2.5" 160GB HDD, boasts 6 USB ports (four at the rear, two mini-USBs on the front), an integrated mini-SD reader, 1 GB of DDR2-533 MHz RAM, a single RJ-four5 for LAN, integrated 802.11g WiFi, and a DVI port for your digital display.

"The Fit-PC 2 features no cooling slots whatsoever, and in fact operates in complete silence thanks to its fanless design."

Sorry, no analogue VGA-type monitors will work with this unit, but who still has those anyway?

The Fit-PC 2 features no cooling slots whatsoever, and in fact operates in complete silence thanks to its fanless design. It does get rather warm when you play HD movies off of it however, the GMA500 generating some extra heat that the passive coolers just can't get rid of quickly enough. Still, it never got hot enough to bog the system down or fall over, although it might be a bit touch and go in mid-summer conditions.

For "regular" computing uses, the Z530 even though it's pretty old at this point, still packs a fair deal of power. With our test unit running Ubuntu in fact, there's plenty of juice and everything is slick, smooth, and without those annoying CPU-choked hiccups you might expect of such an old rig. After all, Linux is one of the most ideal ways of extracting more use out of old hardware, we did also have a Win 7-based Fit PC which we'll review in full next month, which did suffer a little when you start multitasking.

The Ubuntu base does make the DX10 capabilities of the GMA500 a bit of a moot point of course, but then it would hardly be the ideal gaming rig even under Windows so that's no great loss in this application. Sure you could get it going under Wine, but the GPU is really more focussed on high-def video playback than ultimate gaming framerates, and with the added overhead of a virtualised environment we're sure it would be pretty dismal.

Now for the most interesting bit. One of the reasons the older Atom was fitted, was because there aren't as yet low-Wattage new-generation Atoms. Not this low at least. At full load, playing back an HD movie for instance, the Fit PC is rated at just 9W. It can idle at as low as 2W. That and the silent operation make it an ideal alternative to a media-centre rig based on full PC hardware.

"...if you're a Linux fan or want a low-power home media centre without so much as impacting your monthly electrical bill, the Fit PC 2 is rather nice."

That said, it's a little pricey considering you're getting last-generation hardware. I've seen nettops based on the Atom 330 at around the same figure – this Ubuntu-powered version goes for R3999, although you can get one without an HDD or OS for R3500. Which unless you have a USB optical and a Live CD, is pretty useless.

Still, if you're a Linux fan or want a low-power home media centre without so much as impacting your monthly electrical bill, the Fit PC 2 is rather nice. As long as you can setup MythTV, which is a dodle these days, you'll be up and running in no time. You will have to get your own remote however – the unit has IR built-in but doesn't go so far as to bundle a remote.

Russell Bennett

Liked

Total silence.
Low power

Disliked

Heat when loaded.
Slightly pricey

Supplier contact:
For full specs, go to: http://www.fit-pc.com/web/fit-pc2/specifications/

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HARDWARE REVIEWS

A NICHE TOO FAR?

D-Link DIR-412

D-Link has long been one of those networking equipment providers. Not the rock stars of the industry. Not the huge names with legions of fans. But nevertheless a company with the products to match the giants, and a small company attitude and agility, not to mention pricing strategies! There's something very cool about staying in the shadows and just, well, providing networks to customers in need.

And provide networks D-Link does, there's not a lot of networking infrastructure that the company wouldn't have covered. Usually in a robust and dependable form as well.

But the DIR-412 breaks from this stoic tradition a bit. Exactly what it is, is a mobile Internet router built to utilise both fixed-line, DSL-style broadband via the integrated Ethernet port, and the 3.5G GSM connections which are rapidly being deployed by the major cellular providers, and then distribute this connectivity via 802.11n WiFi (in fact called Wireless N 150 in this application)to clients in the vicinity of the radio network signal.

It's basically meant as a tiny, dual-link broadband and n-specification WiFi solution, in a box. The GSM connection isn't built-in, but requires that you connect your Huawei or whatever 3G modem your service has provided you with to the incorporated USB port at the top of the unit. Just like your ADSL line will need a router, which the DIR-412 will happily plug onto the end of.

"There's something very cool about staying in the shadows and just, well, providing networks to customers in need."

Once these links are in place however, well I must say I continued to fail to see the real point, but that's largely because my office area is a complete GSM deadspot. Occasionally I get fleeting signals from the nearest MTN tower, sometimes enough to get an SMS or two through even, but actually make a call? Hah!

Which makes 3G as a viable data connection all rather pointless in my case. If the DSL line went down (which it almost never does these days), there will be at best scraps of 3G bandwidth available to replace it at any time. Naturally this is a problem unique to, well, anyone not living in a major metro centre. 3G coverage in the country is booming, after all, driven at last by actual consumer demand for it!

However, even when it did work, it seems a bit of an expensive failover route at the moment, with DSL prices

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freefalling past R30/GB and mobile data continuing to be comparatively exorbitant. Switch over to the 3G link and continue to use your Web the way you do on the fixed-line, and you'll be paying a significant bill at the end of the month, or have eaten through your cap in days.

And once again conditions which are hardly the fault of D-Link shouldn't impact on this review of its product. So let's effectively ignore the costs completely.

It's quite a compact unit, although saddled with a bulky power source for a plug, and couldn't be simpler. All piano-black at the top, there's just a USB port for your 3G modem, and the WPS button. The only actual button on the whole unit, this attempts to automatically configure a secure WiFi environment with an absolute minimum of fuss and with no technical assistance on hand.

Round the back, there's only a power port, the Ethernet RJ-45, a recessed Reset button and a rocker switch with two settings, WAN and 3G. That, quite literally, is it.

Fortunately when you log in to the device's Web-based management console, there are a significant amount of options for the networking professional to adjust and optimise. But the interface is also extremely straightforward, if you're a home user with limited tech skills you'll be able to get through it. There's significant security to protect your prescious bandwidth from WiFi-enabled digital petty thieves who might live nearby as well

"It's a good unit which perfectly fills a very specific need."

It's a good unit which perfectly fills a very specific need. If internet connectivity is positively critical to your business, as it so often is today, and you're already running your key stations at least on their own WLAN access networks, and finally live or work in an area where you've got healthy GSM broadband coverage, most of the time, the DIR-412 is an awesome little redundant-route connectivity solution for the entire operation.

But prevailing market conditions mean it's a backup you need to think twice about here, and the possible costs involved. Perhaps when the GSM and fixed-line bandwidth prices are at least closer to competitive again, which isn't far off now, this might just be the wireless broadband solution-in-a-box of choice for digital homes joining the information age. Small, powerful, easy to setup and administer with good security measures,,,

Yes, it's ingenuity goes way beyond its size, and the fact that all it really does is act as a conduit works in its favour in many cases, as it'll work with and continue to leverage all your existing networking technologies as a simple bolt-on redundancy setup, at least for the wireless-enabled clients.

"Small, powerful, easy to setup and administer with good security measures."

The latest mobility developments and trends work against it however, and its time as being relevant is short. Modern notebooks or, naturally, smartphone devices have GSM capabilities built in, So the WLAN is the link to the DSL-backed standard network, and the integrated 3G the internal automatic failover route. So the only way this D-Link would help you, would be sheer ease of securing the whole network concoction.

Likes

Cute and compact
Typically good management interface

Disliked

No LAN, aside from the link to the router

Russell Bennett

For full specs, visit http://www.dlink-tw.com.tw/temp/dk2Model/533/DIR-412_A1_Datasheet_01(W)%20-%2010-22-2009.pdf

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HARDWARE REVIEWS

NTH-LEVEL PERFORMANCE

D-Link wireless N desktop adaptor

Wireless N has yet to make huge inroads into the wireless market. As with any new technology it takes awhile for full industry adoption, a problem exasperated when the industry in question has many ancillaries to create the final product. That's why despite Wireless N just being the answer, most laptops are still sitting on G. You see it's not just the network cards that need to be out there, companies selling assembled machines and laptops have to start using the technology, Wireless N routers need to become more affordable as well. It would've be nice if as soon as Wireless N came into existence it became a worldwide standard, but it didn't.

Okay so now you know a little bit about why you don't have Wireless N right now, but are no doubt asking why you should have D-Link's Wireless N adapter. Very simple answer to that question actually, it's faster. Wireless N can transfer data at 150 mb/s, Wireless G as a comparative forerunner trails behind at 54 mb/s. And that's essentially all you need to know, it will connect you to a network faster than you're used to. So in our office we have always just used flash disks to transfer data amongst ourselves, with the D-Link adapter installed we were just going over the network with far less hassle because in the SACM office flash disks disappear with alarming frequency.

Many people despite the speed boost will still wonder whether or not they actually need this sort of product from D-Link. After all never in a million years, okay it might not take that long, will South African internet providers give us anything even approaching 54 mb/s. Fair enough your internet connection doesn't need Wireless N but the above example of over-network data transfer makes a big difference. And besides, Wireless G is soon to be obsolete so you may as well make the jump soon.

On a little side note of interest, I have also discovered that this D-Link adapter is a useful card for Mac users. Yes I know all you Mac users will say Apple's been on Wireless N for ages so how does that help. At our office however there is a mixture of Mac's and PC's, and let's face it few Mac's will go PC-less their entire life. So whilst we have Wireless N capacity when the PC's are on the network they drag the entire networks performance down, so the the Wireless N card allowed the Mac users some piece of mind in that their network performance wasn't being hindered by lowly Wireless G.

Kyle Stone

Like
150 mb/s Wireless N
Dislike
Nothing

Pre release, full specs not yet available. www.dlink.com

HARDWARE REVIEWS

DX11 FOR THE PEOPLE

AMD/ATI Radeon 5570

We decided to test this entry level 5000 series card from ATI in a slightly unusual manner, because whilst this is a card of the DX11 generation it is still a relatively inexpensive budget card. Given that, it seemed somewhat redundant to plug the 5570 into a Core i7 behemoth running piles of DDR3 RAM, if a consumer could afford those parts they'd more than likely combine them with a 5870, not the card we had. So we used hardware that was presumably more in line with the 5570 buyers budget and pitted the 5570 against a previous generation 4850.

In terms of specs the 5570 appears on paper to be a competent card. It is of 40nm fabrication with the core running at 650 MHz. The 1GB of DDR3 memory runs at 900MHz with a 128 bit bus. Happily the 5570 also features AMD's Eyefinity technology to run multiple monitors.

The benches we ran produced some varying and interesting results. In the higher strain tests, so higher resolution and anti-aliasing, the 5570 pulled ahead of the 4850 significantly. The Crysis Warhead test in particular showed this trend well, at 1680 X 1050 resolution and 8AA the 4850 completely stalled but the 5570 was playable with fps in the mid teens, not fast but playable. On the other end the scale however, on benchmarks with lower resolution and just 2AA the 4850 actually had the edge. The advantage however was negligible in all such scenarios and to the naked eye wouldn't have even been noticed. This was true for the most part throughout the battery of benchmarks.

Whilst the benchmarks didn't produce an outright victory on every setting for the 5570, that's not to say that this isn't a very good buy. Whether as an upgrade or building a new machine, the 5570 offers DX11 and ATI's hallmark visual quality at an entry level price. It is easy to get bogged down in the mountains of raw data that a battery of benchmarks produces, so here is the cut down summary of the benchmarks. The 5570 produces excellent picture quality and can power an aging system to run any game you want, job done.

There is more to the story though. If like myself you have a previous generation system and are looking for a DX11 upgrade but all that recession malarkey leaves you searching for a bargain basement card this isn't quite it, the 5670 should only be slightly more expensive after all. Furthermore it will run anything you throw at it now, but whereas the 4850 is still doing that this long after release the 5570 is unlikely to punch above its weight for as long. The 5570 just isn't a big upgrade over something like a 4850. That's a unique scenario though, if you're building a budget PC from scratch then the 5570 is a sterling choice for your graphics solution.

Further to this premise of performance computing on a budget, the 5570 is supermodel small and drains power in a very frugal manner. That may seem insignificant but the reality is that budget PC's generally don't have motherboards with countless slots. So the 5570 immediately upon installation opened up a previously inaccessible slot the dual slot 4850 hung over. Similarly, with the power issue budget PC's aren't likely to use hugely advanced PSU's but rather no name brand low wattage examples so the 5570 also has an advantage there with stated maximum board power of 45 watts.

Ultimately if you don't have much cash to throw around but still yearn for the latest games as well as beautiful visual effects then yes, AMD is still the brand you want.

Kyle Stone

Likes

DX11 visuals
price/performance ratio
compact design

Dislikes

might age quickly
128 bit

For full specs, go to http://www.amd.com/us/products/desktop/graphics/ati-radeon-hd-5000/hd-5570/Pages/hd-5570-overview.aspx

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Lean mean mail-serving machine

Kerio Connect 7

Now, no, sure. Not everyone necessarily needs a mail server, you can rely on this as a service from ISPs and various other providers along the stream, so to speak.

What about if you want your email on multiple devices, your desktop, smartphone, and laptop for instance. A carefully-executed myriad of specific settings adjustment will get you most of the way there. But not quite.

Of course if you want this sort of flexibility with your email, it's likely because you're running an office. An office means a business, and as a business, well, you're obliged to archive your company email store. It's a record of evidence after all. So you already know that, actually, your own mail server is a very helpful thing.

Kerio Mail has been a leader in SME mail-servers since, seemingly since mail-servers became a good idea. Now it's changed, we suppose to reflect the more diverse needs of email uses these days, and the latest version, Kerio Connect 7, has just been released.

It's a product we're familiar with, but even so the interface still impresses immediately with it's slickness. Its superb combination of user-comprehensible and extremely powerful at, well being a mail-server, this software is.

While Kerio Connect 7 has a new skin with its name change, underneath it remains very similar to the product we mail-server aficionados know as Kerio Mail. But there are some really good new features in this latest version to make an upgrade worth it.

Such as the support of mobile devices as alluded to earlier. Mobile Web and email is quickly becoming the norm these days with the proliferation of smartphones into the market, so Kerio had to put it in there really. Anyway, it is, and it works with no sweat at all.

Then, yes, you get full archiving compliance, automated backups and restores which don't even have to bring the system down for a moment, clever anti-spam, a dual-engine anti-virus platform. You also gain a central email data repository which is completely in

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and under your control, now for the first time also boasting full manageability remotely via the Web.

But perhaps most crucial of all the new features of Kerio Connect 7, is its extensibility. It will install on top of a wide variety of operating systems, including all flavours of Windows, current and previous generations of Mac OS, various Linux distributions and even Solaris. More than being able to install to this base, it also integrates with all the standard mail clients used on these software platforms, so whether your users are on Macs or PCs, Windows or Linux won't mean much to you, you will still be able to manage, control, backup and store a complete email repository. It's really ingenious.

And what about if you have a server machine for the task but don't as yet even have an OS on it? Still not a problem, as this helpful company even provides fully working VMWare and Parallels virtual appliances! They've just made it so easy for you to deploy and get started. It's functionality-rich right out the box as well, even before you start playing with any of the management options. And it doesn't take an uncommon ICT talent to be able to adjust these settings to suit your exact needs, anyone with some slightly-above-basic PC literacy will manage.

All of this for a mere 75 – 110MB download, depending on your platform of choice (around 600MB for the virtual appliances). For a robust, secure email repository and distribution service which is controlled in-house rather than by an uncaring, untouchable Web-based provider. It's definitely worth the investment – for us the built-in smartphone support was enough to win us over, and all the other great features mere bonuses!

Russell Bennett

Liked

Extensive capabilities
Appliance functionality
Smartphone support

Disliked

Nothing

For full details, go to http://www.kerio.com/connect

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SOFTWARE REVIEWS

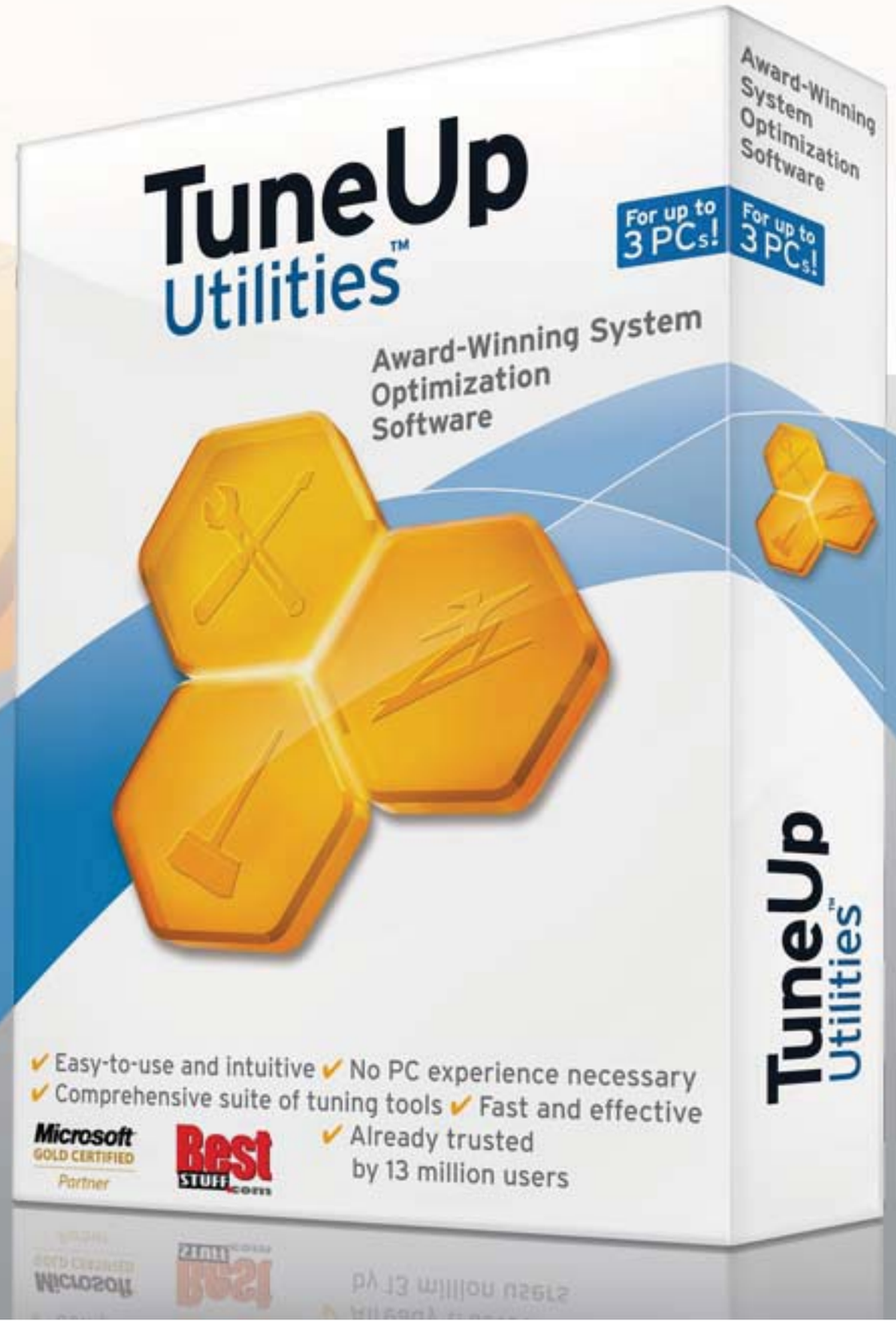
TuneUp Utilities

With extended use Windows gets cluttered, sad but true. It's why many PC users format their hard drives every so often. For those users that aren't too keen on wiping their hard drive every spring their options are; endure gradually deteriorating performance until their next machine or use something like TuneUp Utilities.

TuneUp Utilities can be broadly divided into four categories. Maintenance of your PC's health, improving performance, customising some elements of your GUI and if the preemptive maintenance fails it'll fix problems. TuneUp Utilities will do all this for all Microsoft's OS offerings from XP onwards, and thankfully that includes both 32 and 64-bit editions.

For programme's such as this the primary drawcard is often the routine and scheduled maintenance tasks which can be performed. And yes they can be useful, but it must be said that most of the actions taken are very low level. They essentially boil down to defragging the HDD, deleting lines in the registry and

Windows MD



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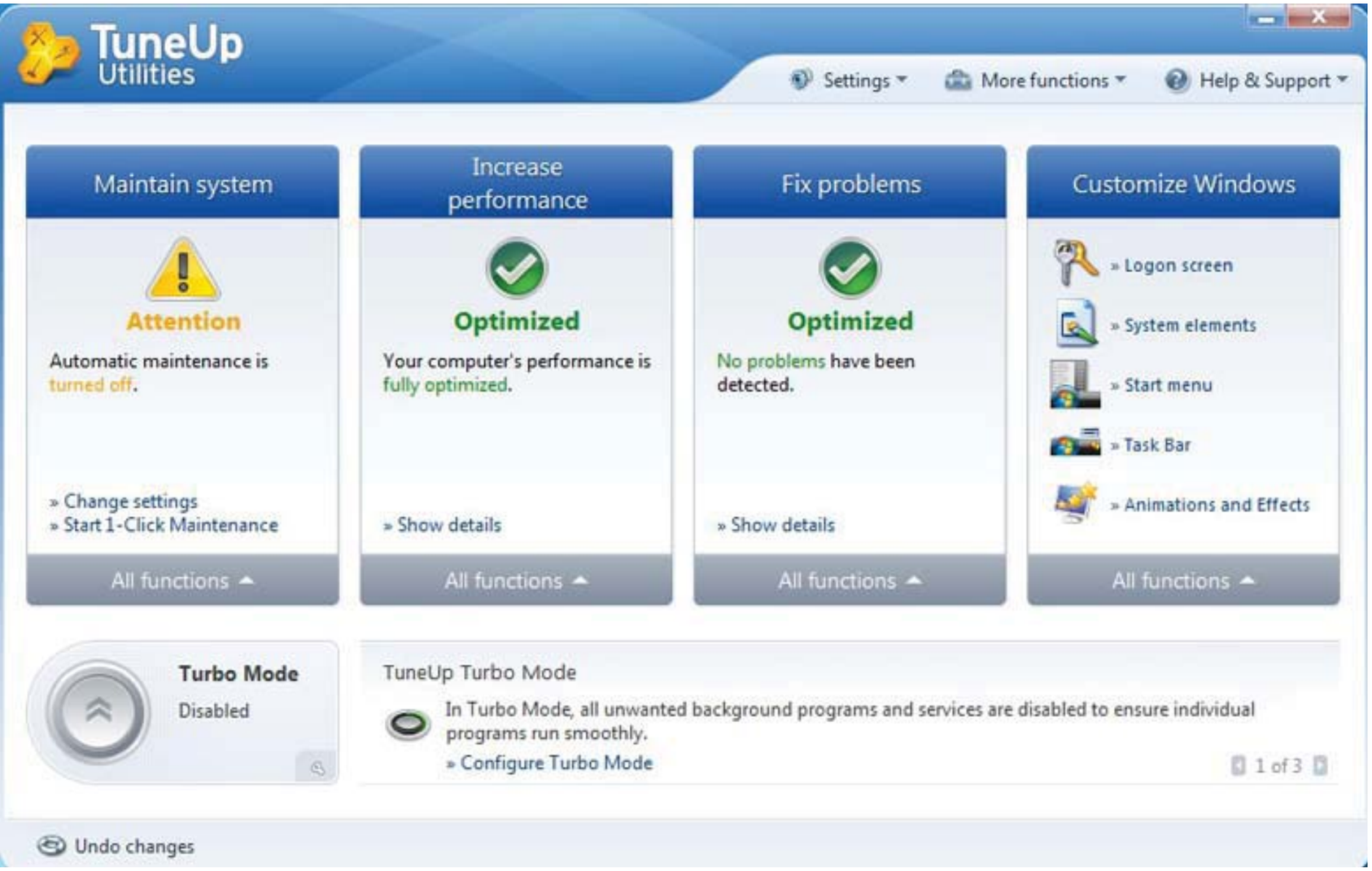
SOFTWARE REVIEWS



that's about it. In fairness though that is essentially the definition of maintenance, simple light work to keep things running smoothly, which TuneUp does well. The same goes for the fixing element, don't expect TuneUp to magically resolve fatal exception errors and blue screens. I say again though, this is a product to tune your PC, not perform open-heart surgery, that's what a PC technician is for.

The customisation portion of TuneUp was for me the most disappointing, there just isn't that much of interest to it. I changed my login screen background and that was it, sure there were other features but really they're just an arbitrarily bolted on gimmick. That's not actually a criticism though, the customisation options are a bonus if you find something you like but otherwise don't impact the experience.

Last but not least there is the performance optimisation, which is essentially an extension of the maintenance procedures. A well-maintained machine is most likely to run at full capacity. That's why a freshly installed Windows is always fastest, nothing's gone wrong yet. TuneUp does have a very nice feature for performance; Turbo mode can be activated when you're doing an intensive task requiring optimal performance. There are several steps taken to achieve this but the most alluring, particularly for the gamers out there, is that TuneUp with Turbo enabled will basically block everything that isn't needed for the intensive task at hand. Gamers everywhere will immediately think; more RAM available, and you'd be right.

TuneUp Utilities does everything expected of it and as a last little hook thrown in can be installed on three PC's without violating the license. A worthwhile purchase.

Kyle Stone

Likes

- 3 PC user license
- Broad compatibility
- Simple to use
- Turbo mode

Dislikes

- Customisation options shallow
- yearly format achieves similar results

For full details, visit http://www.phoenixsoftware.co.za/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=flypage.tpl&product_id=99&category_id=1&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=78

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GAME REVIEWS

GAMING

Computers, just what exactly are they? I ask this rather ambiguous question because this is the relaunch issue of SA Computer Magazine, and as such when we were deciding where to focus the gaming section, we needed to decide just what platforms are relevant. Now I'm not going to get into a boring discussion about what some old imperialists in Oxford believe a computer is, but suffice to say we're reducing the console gaming content for the time being in SACM, because we don't believe them to be computers. The SACM gaming section will be primarily focused on PC gaming, although mobile gaming will also feature. That's not to say however that we've completely embargoed consoles, sometimes for instance there is a console exclusive that has really spiked our interest.

We've come to this decision because there are a few simple but critical differences between computers and consoles. A computer is multifunctional, and for that you need a keyboard, which consoles have the option of but really, who uses them? When I was a kid consoles used the name TV Games, and sure with the internet and the online services offered by modern consoles they have became versatile multimedia and entertainment devices. They are not however computers, they are focussed entertainment devices, and this is a computer magazine not just an entertainment magazine. Mobile phones though have become mini computers, they have keyboards and they have all the multi function features upon which humans have come to rely on with computers. So as they are little computers which can also do a bit of gaming they get the nod, along with PC's obviously. This decision isn't set in stone though, so your feedback on the issue would be much appreciated.

Okay so now that we have that out the way, on to the good stuff. The feature review this issue is Bioware's latest masterpiece, Mass Effect 2. A game that is, well, game changing, at least in terms of cinematic gameplay and just generally sucking the player into its universe. My favourite game of all time that is. We also have a quasi-review on the online game Evony. Being the first issue and deadlines being what they are the gaming section is a little light this issue but don't worry it's in development. Lastly we also have a quick look at the Starcraft 2 Beta test.

Kyle Stone

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GAME REVIEWS

DEAD MAN KILLING

Mass Effect 2 review

If you only take one thing from this review, make it this, Mass Effect 2 is a spectacular game that any gamer needs to play, it is an epic story packed full of slick and fluid action. It isn't perfect and there are certainly some problems, annoyances and oversights, but as a whole the package really is very special indeed. Mass Effect was a critical and commercial success and yet had some serious shortcomings, but Bioware had always promised a trilogy. There was time to fix the problems. That's Mass Effect 2 then, not all the issues are gone but it is still in essence an amped up version of the first game with most of the problems solved. Within two days of getting hold of it, the game has jumped right up there near the top of my all time favourites list.

I won't give too much away on the story because so much of the entertainment value for Mass Effect 2 stems from one of the best video game storylines ever. The saga picks up not long after the events of the first game and within a couple of minutes you just know you're in for a big one. There'll be some big events with big consequences, new intriguing characters to recruit and a bundle of new locations to explore, and this time the locations aren't just an assortment of cut and paste dustbowls, but unique environments.

Mass Effect 2 is a very good looking game, not the most

150m

MASS EFFECT 2

advanced graphics in the world but its excellent art design makes all the difference for the Unreal engine. Bioware have also somehow pulled off the same trick they did with ME1, in that it looks great without being a system hog. On my aging system it runs smooth but still looks excellent, I've played several recent releases that don't look as good as Mass Effect 2 but run far more sluggishly.

One of the most interesting features of Mass Effect 2 becomes evident immediately upon installation, that is the character and storyline continuation. You can import save games from the first game so decisions and events from the original ME are reflected. Now I love this feature, it just personalises the game that little bit but it can present a bit of a problem if you either haven't played the first game or have lost your saves. Not only will you miss out on the opportunity to create a unique experience but the all important story element of the game could be blunted. There are several twists in the story that will go over your head if you're not intimately familiar with ME1.

"There are several twists in the story that will go over your head if you're not intimately familiar with ME1."

The control interface has been modified and whilst at first could seem alien, after getting to know it you will find it very effective. And it gels well with the new obsession of the games designers, violent fast paced action with lots of cover to cower behind a la Gears of War.

There are some problems; it's a shallow experience in terms of an RPG, the RPG elements are there just implemented in a different manner, and whilst vastly improved some of the side quest duties such as resource scanning can be tedious. Then the bugs, I've read reports of full game crashes but I was spared that fate. I did however get stuck on the environment a few time but so far in 40 hours of game play that's happened fewer times that I have fingers, so not enough to detract from the experience.

The conclusion then for Mass Effect 2 is a short and simple one. Excellent, go get it, with or without playing the original.

Like

- strong characters
- beautiful visuals
- story continuity
- action fast and fluid
- slick control interface

Dislike

- shallow RPG
- side quests improved but scanning boring
- some bugs, getting stuck on terrain
- it ends

Details

Genre: RPG
Platform: PC
Developer: Bioware
Publisher: EA
Score: 97/100

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GAME REVIEWS

STARSTRUCK. AGAIN.

Starcraft 2: Wings of Liberty Beta

Well, was Kyle green with envy when, after he reported somewhat lamentably in the news section that the SC2: Wings of Liberty Beta had gone live and he didn't have a Beta key, I arrived in the office and announced that, suprise surprise, I did!

It pays to know the right people you see. At a poker night with the NAG gents I swore at them because I'd seen them playing the Beta in their office earlier the same week, and come Monday one of these generous chaps sent me one of his extra keys. In truth, two of them, but don't tell Kyle!

It's been a really long time since I waited for the 1.8GB worth of client to download with such anticipation. I'm quite simply a massive SC fan you see, and was filled with trepidation – had they done as so many sequels had and mucked this incarnation of the RTS legend up with excessive 3D and "new" gameplay ideas which murder the soul of the original, like the new C&C?

Course there was still more waiting when I finally did get to fire it up, as more game content (maps and the like) downloaded, but finally I was logged in to Battle.Net and ready to go. Yep, that's right sports fans, no LAN. Battle.Net only. Which could be a problem on my measly 38four kbit ADSL line...

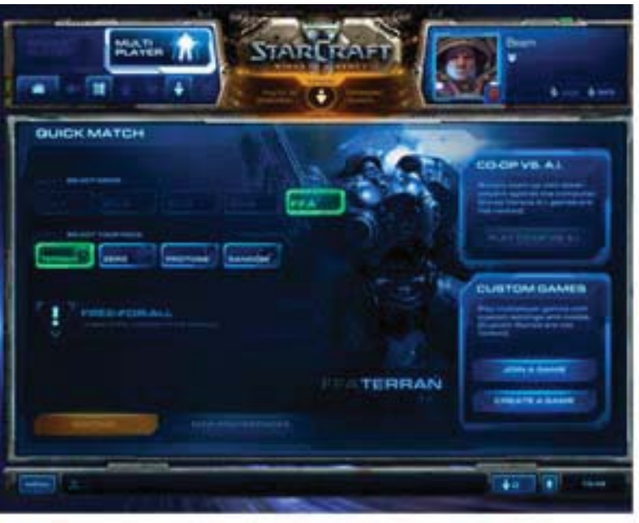
In truth, it isn't that bad a problem. Yes, there are nights when it's a complete waste of mine and my opponents time to try and play against me, as I will be dropped at some point. But it works about 75% of the time, which is good enough for me, although I can't really play games larger than 2v2. That'll do for now.

"Now SC2 is very pretty, in fact it's gorgeous, but there are many who won't really admit it."

Now SC2 is very pretty, in fact it's gorgeous, but there are many who won't really admit it. SupCom2 for instance is much prettier overall, but then it also changes the game mechanics completely as a result. Incredibly, when you're playing SC2, despite the new graphics and updated units, it regularly feels as if you've stepped back a decade, and you have to remind yourself that, indeed, this isn't the original game!

It's so closely modelled on the first one though... it's certain to disappoint many who are looking for the franchise to go fresh, new, and innovative. Not long-time fans like me though, I think what they've done is perfect. After all, all we really wanted from this sequel was SC with updated graphics, as there was quite literally nothing to fault with the old classic.

GAME REVIEWS



And by closely modelled, I mean the interface is pretty much identical, at least in the way that you do things like build up your bases and manipulate your units it is. If you'd just stepped away from playing BroodWars and into SC2, you'd think it could just be a graphics and units mod pack more than a complete new game. The three races are the same, their units are if not the same then very similar apart from some new ones at the very top end of the pecking order. Even your resources are the same, everything being built from a combination of Lythium crystals and Vespane gas, although you do get "rich" crystals in certain areas of the map now.

It really shows up the basic rightness of the original, rather than any laziness or boredom on the part of the developers, that the game can be so damn similar yet utterly engrossing and deeply enjoyable.

One suggestion however, and it's one denied we Beta testers, is to get your game back up to form against some AI drones before heading into the Battle. Net melee. As ever with online gaming, the community is brutal. After all, a glorious win taking a full 60 minutes during which a full fleet battle between the Protoss' mighty armada and a fully-upgraded Terran army occurs, counts exactly the same to your online player ranking as a quick 'n dirty 10-minute grunt-rush of a game. Knowing how to defend against this sort of attack is critical – if you don't you will have short games over and over again.

It's all about countering what your opponent is throwing at you. A Zergling swarm will get eaten up pretty quickly by several Terran bunkers filled with machine-gun toting marines for instance, backed up by a couple of guys in power armour on the outside. Watch for flying units as well and counter with the strongest land-air defense systems you have, and if you survive the first 10 to 15 minutes, make sure you've got detectors up to avert the sneaky cloaked attacks (a Terran Ghost with 3 Ghost Acadamies and already-primed nukes is an army-killer if it can't be detected).

Of course, ultimately you'll be getting to the point where it's you launching the rush first. Intelligence is the key to this strategy.

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Go zip around his base with a worker drone, keeping him busy while you establish operations just outside of his radar range. Then figure out from what you've seen what units he's busy preparing, and just build the antidote to his budding army. But make sure you get in and shred his workers, or take down his pylons if you're facing the Protoss, before he turtles up with an overkill of turrets to shred your one-trick force.

Me, I tend to like playing with noobs myself. I came across a couple of players even more noobie than me at the beginning of my playing of this Beta, and just built an unstoppable Protoss carrier force by claiming all eight resource fields on the map while he laboured away at just two locations, completely unhurried and seemingly unperturbed.

"Whichever way you play it, SC2 is an absolute hit."

That is until my fighters filled his screen with the splurting blood of his smelly, Creep-driven Zerg brood.

Whichever way you play it, SC2 is an absolute hit. Kyle might rate Mass Effect 2 as the best game he's ever played, and I agree. As a story-driven RPG that absolutely hooks the player into its world it's comparable only to its own close relative, Dragon Age (which I prefer, just, because I'm a bit of a gaming masochist and it's at least 80 hours, Dragon Age Origins).

But if you want a high-speed, high-action RTS that hits the spot every time with absolutely balanced, utterly classic gameplay, you need to get SC2: Wings of Liberty. If you're in any way a Starcraft fan, you have to get it.

If, however, you prefer the more "modern" RTS games like SupCom2 and C&C, well, stick with those. If it's fresh and new and innovative you're looking for, trust me, look elsewhere. This game is all about the nostalgia. And I love it! Now if only there was something akin to this beauty for Quake, I'd be in Nirvana!

Russell Bennett

Liked

Graphics. Fresh, but nostalgic.
Old-school feel, pace, balance.

Disliked

Battle.Net only
The Light and Dark thing of the retail game.

Developer: Blizzard Entertainment
Publisher: Activision
Web: www.ohcomeonjustgoogleStarCraft2infactifyouhaventalreadyyoumightnotlikethisgame.com

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WEBWARE REVIEWS

THE DAILY GRIND...

Evony

This article began as a game review, but then, as articles do, changed midway into something a bit more...

But let's start with the game itself.

It isn't brand-new, in fact it's been around for about a year already. But the controversial, scantily-clad hotties finally did entice us to log in and have a go. And no, we weren't expecting softcore porn, we'd followed the whole Evony advertising controversy, we just wanted a look at this massively multi-player game that all hardcore gamers the world over seem to dismiss as "derivative" and "lacking original ideas".

Let's get that out of the way straight away. It is derivative. In fact there are a long list of management games to rattle off that it adopts elements of.... not the least of which are the greats Settlers and, of course, the evergreen Civilisation series (to which a 5th installation has just been announced – Hooray!).

However, it also isn't. The thing is that while the general mechanics, management duties, and empire-building nature of the game is as ancient as gaming itself (what, must be like a whole 2 decades old or so now!), the game isn't. Because, as with most MMOs, building up your city isn't the main hook that will keep you coming back for more.

The fact that there are thousands upon thousands of other Internet-connected gamers, across the globe, building their own armies, in their own cities, right next door to yours. Each, seemingly, rabidly bent on subjugating your growing population beneath their own thumbs and looting every last vestige of a resource out of your poorly-defended startup position. Civ never had that, AI is normally far more balanced and, frankly, merciful than human gamers.

You do get 7 days from signing up of "Beginner's Protection" during which time these wild dogs aren't allowed to hammer down your castle gates, but thereafter you're on your own. And since the technologies and resources you gather in the first week of playing simply aren't anywhere near enough to be called any shred of imposing strength, well it can get very, very ugly.

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So that's why you need an Alliance. Follow the achievement-based in-game quests, Evony's equivalent of a single-player element of sorts, and you'll likely already have joined one... but that isn't really enough. You need to get into one of the big, respected ones to truly be in any way safe, and the Catch-22 of course is that these are so big and effective because they only take experienced players who've already reached a healthy level of prestige in the game!

Never mind that though, the fun of Evony is in building an army capable of withstanding these pretty regular raids, and eventually mounting some of your own, no doubt on weak noobs at first because the big players will be out of your league. And this is where the review changes, as this is where the game changes.

The thing is, these MMOs are so dominated by what are referred to as cookie-cutter players... they learn on the game forums what the strongest armies are (archers are where the real power is in Evony), and then just churn out huge attack forces based on this unit and pretty much endless resources. So you pretty much have to do the same if you're to compete.

It doesn't take very long for you to be done building your first couple of cities to critical mass, at which point resources become largely irrelevant in their abundance. However, large armies consume large quantities of food. So much that a city's food production, even maxed out with bonusses from occupying nearby lake tiles, has no hope of providing for their needs. So you have to farm NPCs.

Barbarian cities they're called in this game, or as the Evony wiki describes them, the supermarkets of the Evony world. They're brainless, automated cities which simply regenerate resources (up to the limit, defined by the level of the city) and armed forces, and then wait for another player to sweep in and take them away, bolstering his armies food and personal gold reserves. After which they regenerate again.

It's a pretty brainless task, farming these defenceless nothings. A certain number of Ballistae, teamed up with

"It doesn't take very long for you to be done building your first couple of cities to critical mass,..."

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an appropriate number of transporters and a hero with decent attack stats, can farm NPCs all day without incurring any unit losses at all. But it's mind-numbingly repetitive. Scout the site, check the report to see if its full of resources, send out your army, and then wait the required time for your force to march to the chosen city, plunder it, and march home. Rinse, repeat.

But, if you want to become one of the Evony heavy hitters, it's a necessary evil. The army sizes needed to be a player simply will not last without this practice. Yes you can buy food at the market, but without farming your gold will be gone fairly soon too. So you've got to do it.

And it's at this point that you realise this game, has become work, rather than play. The same can be said of Eve Online, an MMO I still adore for it's infinite-space themes and limitless skill tree, and from what I've experienced of the massively popular WoW too. To keep players coming back, and hold the interest of even higher-level players, MMOs have to be built around some form of drudgery, some repetitive and menial task, which limits how much fun you can actually have playing it. In Eve, without ISK, you can't really engage in effective PvP (Player versus Player) campaigns – not ones you have any chance of winning at least. And getting ISK means repeating the drudgery for hours and hours on end, like something you're compelled to do without necessarily liking it (errr... work?)!

Don't know about you, but I have enough work. I prefer to play a game now and then to escape work. Not add to the load!

The thing is, a game like Evony would work fairly well if this could be avoided, and it could be avoided if every person playing it had a reasonable amount of time daily to play. But there are many who don't, who seem to be online all day, every day, amassing resources, building unstoppable armies, repeating the same steps over and over ad infinitum until, well, they're all-but invincible.

To challenge this ruling hierarchy, requires that you put in the same time, with the same brain-out commitment.

What it doesn't require, is skill, clever strategies, or inventive thinking. While what it doesn't provide, is raw fun, enjoyment, kicks.

So nearly my type of game. I love strategy, I love empire management. But I'm not the biggest fan of repetitive work duties. At all.

The only fortunate thing, is that it's entirely free to play. Sure you can pay USD for a bit of a leg up over your competition, but you don't have to, as long as you're prepared to work that little bit harder. I'm not.

Like

the constant threat
city-building
vast populated servers

Dislike

the grind
the lying adverts

Details

Genre:	MMO
Platform:	Browser, Flash
Developer:	**Evony, LLC**
Score:	38/100
Cost:	Free

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